

# Divine Holiness & Sanctifying God: A Proposal

Chamberlain Holiness Lectures

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*When God is termed holy, it denotes that excellence which is altogether peculiar to himself; and the glory flowing from all his attributes conjoined, ... whereby he is, and eternally remains, in an incomprehensible manner, separate and at a distance, not only from all that is impure, but likewise from all that is created. ~John Wesley<sup>1</sup>*

This lecture had its genesis nearly fifteen year ago, when as a second year grad student I set out to study all 832 occurrences of the Hebrew words for holy (קֹדֶשׁ קִדְּשׁ קָדַשׁ) in the OT. I bogged down somewhere in Leviticus or Numbers. Although I worked on the topic during my dissertation, I didn't complete my journey through all those texts until the summer of 2008. During the fall of 2008 I made a similar, though much less intensive trek through all the NT texts that use the key Greek word family for holy (ἅγια ἁγιάζω ἅγιος ἁγιωσύνη ἁγιότης ἁγιασμός).

In the process, I found a lot of interesting texts that garner little attention in discussions on holiness (e.g., Isa. 8:13; 29:23; Ezek. 28:22, 25; 38:23). However, two things stand out from the mass of data I compiled. First, God reveals the nature and meaning of His holiness through impersonal objects and then through ethical requirements. Second, the texts in which God speaks of sanctifying Himself and His name grabbed my attention. This lecture seeks to offer a definition of holiness derived inductively from the data of Scripture and relate that definition to God's stated purpose to sanctify Himself in various OT texts. I will first survey a representative sampling of Methodist and non-Methodist theologians' definitions of divine holiness. Second, I will propose a definition of holiness, apply it to God, and consider a few of its theological implications. Third, I will discuss what it means for God to sanctify himself and what it means for us to sanctify God.

## ***Definitions of Divine Holiness in Systematic Theologies***

What is interesting about perusing systematic theologies is the wide variety of definitions given to God's holiness. Here is a representative sampling of Methodist theologians:

**Ralston:** Holiness is spotless purity or moral purity (1851); holiness is rectitude or righteousness (1924).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1850), 667, s.v., Rev. 4:8.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas N. Ralston, *Elements of Divinity: or, A course of lectures* (E. Stevenson, 1851), 25; *Elements of Divinity*, ed. Thomas Osmund Summers (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1924), 31.

**Lee:** Holiness is absolute purity from all moral evil and the presence of all moral goodness.<sup>3</sup>

**Wakefield:** “Holiness, considered as an attribute of God, is his perfect moral purity. ... Holiness is a complex term, and denotes, not so much a particular attribute, as that *general character* of God which results from all his moral perfections.”

**Raymond:** “The term holiness, in its generic sense, means conformity to law. In thought we remove all limitations and imperfections from the idea of virtue as we find it in men, and this is our best idea of holiness in God.”<sup>4</sup>

**Pope:** Holiness is “that absolute perfection that belongs to God in his eternal essence.”<sup>5</sup>

**Miley:** Holiness is righteousness.<sup>6</sup>

**Wiley:** “Holiness in God is the perfection of moral excellence.”<sup>7</sup>

**Purkiser:** Holiness has three meanings: transcendence, glory, and purity.<sup>8</sup>

**Taylor:** Holiness is “the moral quality of all God’s attributes. ... [It is] radiant goodness, separate from evil, and pure in absolute righteousness.”<sup>9</sup>

**Coppedge:** “The meaning of holiness has six major components. They [are] the concepts of separation, brilliance, righteousness, love, power and goodness.”<sup>10</sup>

In sum, the surveyed Methodist theologians defined divine holiness primarily in terms of moral purity (5x), righteousness (3x), and goodness (3x).

The following definitions are derived from non-Methodist theologians:

**Charnock:** “Holiness is a glorious perfection belonging to the nature of God. ... Negatively, [it] is a perfect and unpolluted freedom from all evil. ... Positively, it is the rectitude or integrity of the Divine nature.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Luther Lee, *Elements of Theology*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Syracuse, NY: Wesleyan Book Room, 1865), 76-77.

<sup>4</sup> Miner Raymond, *Systematic Theology*. vol. 1 (Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe, 1877), 360.

<sup>5</sup> William Burt Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1889), 331. In his 1883, *A High Catechism of Theology*, Pope writes, “[God’s] holiness [is] separation from evil” (p. 82).

<sup>6</sup> John Miley, *Systematic Theology*. vol. 1 (1893, repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 199.

<sup>7</sup> H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1963), 102-103.

<sup>8</sup> W. T. Purkiser, *The Biblical Foundations*, vol. 1 in *Exploring Christian Holiness* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1983), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Richard S. Taylor, *The Theological Formulation*, vol 3 in *Exploring Christian Holiness* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1985), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Coppedge, *Portraits of God: A Biblical Theology of Holiness* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 51.

**Strong:** Holiness designates “self-affirming purity by which he maintains his moral excellence.”<sup>12</sup>

**Hodge:** Holiness is “a general term for the moral excellence of God.”<sup>13</sup>

**Berkhof:** Holiness is “unapproachableness,” and is “not an attribute to be coordinated with others,” but is “predicable about everything that is found in God.”<sup>14</sup>

**Erickson:** God’s holiness is (1) his uniqueness. He is totally separate from all creation. (2) his absolute purity or goodness.<sup>15</sup>

**Grudem:** “God’s holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor.”<sup>16</sup>

**Reymond:** Holiness is God’s “intrinsic ‘unapproachableness,’ that is, his majestic transcendence as the Deity over the creature.”<sup>17</sup>

In sum, the surveyed non-Methodist theologians exhibited less unanimity and defined divine holiness in terms of freedom/separation from sin (2x), unapproachableness (2x), absolute purity/goodness (2x), rectitude, uniqueness, and moral excellence.

What I found striking as I read through these theologians, and particularly the Methodist theologians, is how very little attention was given to developing an exegetical understanding of holiness. The typical procedure was to provide a definition of holiness and then discuss its significance within theology without offering an argument for the definition. In some cases, mention was made of the conjectured etymology of the Hebrew or Greek terms for holiness.<sup>18</sup> In cases where theologians offered a set of texts as the basis of their definition, they normally start with texts that talk about God’s holiness and read their definition out of the text.

While it may seem reasonable enough to begin one’s definition of divine holiness with God, two considerations weigh against it. First, both the concept and the terminology of holiness

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1874), 110.

<sup>12</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Press of E. R. Andrews, 1886), 128.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1873), 413.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1932, 1938; repr. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 513. So also, Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 266.

<sup>15</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 284-85.

<sup>16</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 202.

<sup>17</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*. 2nd Edition - Revised And Updated (Thomas Nelson, 1998), 194.

<sup>18</sup> For a term with over 830 occurrences, any appeal to etymology for help in defining it is unwarranted. As James Barr and many since have argued, context and usage determines the semantic content of words. See especially Barr’s “Etymology and the Old Testament,” in *Language and Meaning: Studies in Hebrew Language and Biblical Exegesis*, Oudtestamentische studiën 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 1-28. Similarly, Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

already existed prior to God's revelation of His holiness to Israel. Thus God was not revealing a new concept, but working with existing language and investing it with additional significance. This argues for a methodology that examines the usages of holiness with non-divine referents before moving to the usages where God is the referent. Second, I find it interesting that God does not start *our* understanding of holiness with an explanation of His holiness. If we take the canonical order of the Torah as His chosen starting point for preserving His revelation for His post-Mosaic audience,<sup>19</sup> then God starts teaching us about holiness with non-personal items: a day, some dirt, an assembly, and first-born children and animals.<sup>20</sup> What follows is an analysis of the first four occurrences of the holiness word group in the Pentateuch.

## A Holy Day

In Gen. 2:3 God makes the seventh day holy. This is the first canonical occurrence of the concept of holiness. Several things are noteworthy here:

- “To sanctify” here denotes God’s action in setting the seventh day apart *from* the other six days on which He worked (cf. Exod. 20:11; 31:16-17).
- Although this text does not develop the implications of God’s sanctification of the seventh day, other texts do.
  1. The seventh day’s sanctified status meant it must not be regarded or treated as common (חֲלָל; Exod. 31:14).
  2. Because God sanctified it, it is holy to Him (Exod. 16:23; 31:15; cf. Isa. 53:13).
  3. God sanctified it by resting, and He required Israel to sanctify it by resting (Exod. 20:11; Exod. 31:14-15; cf. Jer. 17:22, 24, 27).

In other words, God’s activity of resting on the seventh day set it apart from the other six days in which He worked. As a consequence of its separation, it is a special day and must be treated as special by imitating God’s activity that sanctified it.

## Holy Dirt<sup>21</sup>

In Exod. 3:5 God tells Moses that the dirt he is standing on is holy. What made the dirt

<sup>19</sup> The chronological sequence of the Pentateuch’s inscripturation was likely something along the lines of Exod. 15 Song of Moses > Exod. 20 Ten Commandments > Exod. 22-24 Book of the Covenant > Exod. 25-30 Instructions for Tabernacle > Parts or all of Leviticus > Narrative sections of Gen.-Num. > Deuteronomy. The generations that came of Egypt in the Exodus and those born in the Wilderness Wanderings were the only generations to receive the Pentateuchal revelation in its chronological sequence. As far as we know, all subsequent generations received the Pentateuch in the final canonical sequence that we possess. This suggests that the canonical sequence reflects God’s design for the sequencing of this segment of inscripturated revelation.

<sup>20</sup> For a valuable discussion of the hermeneutical implications of doing theology from narratives, see Pratt, Richard L. Jr. “Pictures, Windows, and Mirrors in Old Testament Exegesis,” *WTJ* 45 (1983): 156-167. Pratt’s ideas are fleshed out in his book, *He Gave Us Stories* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Technically, the second occurrence of holiness terminology in the Pentateuch is Gen. 38:21-22 where Tamar is called a *qedashah* (“temple prostitute”) by Judah’s friend the Adullamite. Although this text provides valuable background information for understanding the contemporary Canaanite conception of holiness against which God was revealing His holiness, it is not a text that reveals God’s perspective on holiness. For this reason, it is excluded from this survey of the first occurrences of the term.

holy? I take it that God's manifest presence or glory made the ground holy.<sup>22</sup> I infer here that the fact that it was "holy" meant it had been separated from ordinary dirt. As a result of its separation or set apartness, it required special treatment: Moses had to take off his sandals.

## **A Holy Assembly**

In Exod. 12:16 God designates the first and seventh day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread as days on which a "holy assembly" was to be held. The text does not specify the purpose of the assembly, but Ezek. 46:3, 9 indicate it was for the purpose of worshiping Yahweh.

What is "holy" about this assembly? The text reveals that no work was to be done on these days, except for the work needed to cook. God separated these days from ordinary days by prohibiting work and separated them unto a special purpose: assembly for worship. Holy in this context has the sense of "separated, set apart," and as a consequence special.

## **Holy First-born Men and Animals**

In Exod. 13:2, 11-12 God requires Israel to sanctify every first-born, male child or animal to Him. Numbers 8:16-18 tells us that God apparently intended for the first-born children to have a priestly function, but He later chose the Levites because of their faithfulness to Him during the Golden Calf incident. The sanctification of the first-born animals set them apart to God for a special purpose: sacrificial use. The sanctification of the first-born sons set them apart to God for a special purpose, in this case, divine service, though later they were required to be redeemed.

## **Holiness is Separation**

In each of the first four Pentateuchal texts where God calls something holy, the meaning of the word *holy* involves the idea of "separation." In all its non-divine uses, in addition to its basic idea of separation, it also denotes "not common"<sup>23</sup> and "belonging to God," or more smoothly, "separated from the common or ordinary unto God." My analysis of all the texts where the holiness word group occurs reveals no exceptions to this conclusion.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This inference is supported by the fact that every other place associated with the manifest presence of Yahweh is holy. See Exod. 29:43 where God says the tabernacle will be sanctified (*Nif.* of קִדְּשׁ) by His glory (*kabod*). Appendices 1 & 2 provide lists of the referents of holiness in the OT and NT.

<sup>23</sup> The consistent juxtaposition of holy with its opposite, "common, ordinary," supports this conclusion (cf. Lev. 10:10; 1 Sam. 21:5, 6; Ezek. 22:26; 42:20; 44:23). Holiness, in ceremonial and ethical contexts, also excludes uncleanness (Lev. 11:44; 20:3). However, although one must be ceremonially clean to be holy, being ceremonially clean does not make one holy. Paul validates the inference that the language, requirements, and rites of ceremonial cleanness were intended to teach us about ethical cleanness in 1 Thess. 4:7 where he applies the same language to God's call to sexual purity.

<sup>24</sup> Although I am not using the technical language of componential analysis, that is the essential nature of my analytical method. Regardless of componential analysis's status as a theoretical model, its value as a heuristic tool has been recognized at least since the 1950s. Eugene Nida and Charles R. Tabor, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969); John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974); Francesco Zanella, "The Contribution of Componential Analysis to the Semantic Analysis of a Lexical Field of Ancient Hebrew: Some Concrete Examples from the Lexical Field of the Substantives of Gift," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 2, no. 2 (2008): 189-212. See the associated bibliography in Zanella's article for contemporary discussions of componential analysis.

The use of *badal* בָּדַל “to separate or distinguish” in key holiness texts (cf. Lev. 10:10; 11:45-47; 20:26; 1 Chron. 23:13; Ezek. 22:26) confirms the inference from the previous texts that separation is at the heart of holiness. In Leviticus 20:26, Yahweh delineates the dual nature of the separation inherent in holiness: “And you shall be holy to me, for I, Yahweh, am holy, and I have separated [בָּדַל] you from the peoples to be mine.” Negatively, Yahweh had separated Israel from the defilement of Egypt and the surrounding Canaanites. Positively, He had separated them unto Himself as His prized possession (Exod. 19:5-6).

If separation or set apartness is the basic meaning of holiness in all its non-divine uses, it is reasonable to assume that separation is the basic meaning of holiness when it refers to God. The question regarding God, then, is in what sense is God separate?

### ***Divine Holiness: A Proposal***

My study of the things and persons God calls holy, *before* He introduces His own holiness has led me to the conclusion that God’s holiness, in Scripture, is primarily His *transcendent separateness from all things due to the unique excellence of His being and character*.

I couldn’t help but be pleased to find during the course of researching this topic that John Wesley offered, in his inimitable 18<sup>th</sup> century prose, virtually the same definition that I am offering here: “When God is termed holy, it denotes that excellence which is altogether peculiar to himself; and the glory flowing from all his attributes conjoined, ... whereby he is, and eternally remains, in an incomprehensible manner, separate and at a distance, not only from all that is impure, but likewise from all that is created.”<sup>25</sup>

God’s holiness, secondarily and only as a consequence of the primary sense, is his separateness unto all that is good and thus his separation from all that is evil. This definition seems to accord well with the all the Scriptural data on holiness both as it relates to things and to persons. It captures the essential idea of holiness: separateness. It easily makes sense of the repeated claim in Isaiah that there is no one who can compare with God—His unique excellence separates Him infinitely from any other claimants to divinity.

On the other hand, this definition does not fall into the trap of Rudolph Otto’s “wholly other” definition of divine holiness. I propose that Otto’s definition should be rejected for two reasons. First, it fails to reflect God’s consistent ethical expectation that His people share his character (“partakers of his holiness”; Heb. 12:10) and his nature (“partakers of the divine nature”; 2 Pet. 1:4). Second, it unintentionally denies the real continuity that man has with God as a consequence of his creation as the image of God. God is “other” in the sense of different from us, but He is not “wholly other,” for we bear His image in all the dimensions of our being. Our grace-enabled capacity to be holy is possible only because we are *not* wholly other than He is.

In a study of God’s glory in the OT, prior to this study of holiness, I concluded that God’s

<sup>25</sup> *Explanatory Notes*, 667, s.v., Rev. 4:8.

glory is “the unique excellence of His being and character.” When I began to ask “what is it that separates God from all other beings,” the natural answer seemed to be his glory, that is, his unique excellence. This interrelationship of divine holiness and divine glory seems to fit Isaiah 6:3 very nicely. The seraphic trisagion—“holy, holy, holy”—is their response to the observation of divine glory filling all the earth. Their vision of the manifold unique excellencies of God elicits their affirmation that Yahweh is supremely holy, that is, He is transcendently separate from all things due to the unique excellence of his being and character.<sup>26</sup>

The consequences of this definition for our understanding of God are several. First, holiness is not, as recognized by multiple theologians, one among many other of God’s attributes. Holiness is a statement about the entirety of who God is. In support of this, it is noteworthy that “holy” never occurs in a list of divine attributes, e.g., the Lord is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness (Exod. 34:6).<sup>27</sup> Second, holiness is not a primary essence from which all other divine attributes spring, nor is it a principle which pervades all other attributes. Rather, holiness is the consequence of all that God is. We might say it is the result of the totality of God’s character and being. Third, this understanding would end the dispute about the relationship between divine love and divine holiness. If divine holiness is his transcendent separateness due to the unique excellence of his character and being, then it is not holiness which checks or conditions divine love, but rather divine righteousness or perhaps purity. In other words, the unique excellence of God’s love is one of the aspects of his character that makes him holy.

This definition also illumines the various commands that are given to people in relation to God’s holiness. Consider just two examples. First, Psalm 105:3 which reads, “Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice!” The verb translated “glory” is *hithalelu* (הִתְהַלְלוּ). The *hitpael* form of הָלַל normally means “to boast,” as in 1 Kings 20:11 where Ahab tells Ben-Hadad, “Let not him that girds on his armor boast himself as he that puts it off.”<sup>28</sup> We “glory” in Yahweh’s holy name by boasting about His uniquely excellence character, being, and works that separate Him transcendently from all other rival claimants. God invites us, no, He commands us to boast in Him!

Consider second, Psalm 97’s concluding line. The psalmist wraps up his poetic description of God’s sovereignty (97:1), righteousness (97:2, 6), justice (97:2), power (97:3-5), glory (97:6), transcendence (97:9), and purity (97:10), with, “Be glad in Yahweh, you righteous ones, give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness” (97:13).<sup>29</sup> As we recall how God has

<sup>26</sup> Although space will not permit me to work through each of the texts that attribute holiness to God, my personal examination of them suggests that this definition fits all of them.

<sup>27</sup> Key terms that are collocated with divine holiness include *glory* 5/6x (כְּבוֹד/כָּבוֹד; Exod. 29:43; Lev. 10:3; 1 Chr. 16:29; Ps. 29:2; Isa. 6:3; Ezek. 28:22), *great* 5x (גָּדוֹל; Ps. 77:13; 99:3; Isa. 12:6; Ezek. 36:23; [גָּדֹל] Ezek. 38:23), *awesome* 4x (אֲוָרָא; Exod. 15:11; Ps. 89:8; 99:3; 111:9), *jealous* 2x (קַנָּא/קָנֹא; Josh. 24:19; Ezek. 39:25), *righteousness* 1x (צִדְקָה; Isa. 5:16), *majestic* 1x (מְאֻדָּר; Exod. 15:11).

<sup>28</sup> For other occurrences of הִתְהַלְלוּ with the sense of “boast,” see Psa. 34:2; 49:6; 52:1; Pro. 20:14; 25:14; Jer. 49:4.

<sup>29</sup> The common translation of Psalm 97:12b, “give thanks to his holy name,” in my estimation, wrongly equates זָכַר ‘remembrance, memorial’ with שֵׁם ‘name, reputation.’ The occurrence of these two words in parallel

manifested on our behalf the unique excellencies that set Him transcendentally above both the created universe and all other created beings, our gladness in Him should indeed overflow in expressions of thanksgiving!

How does this understanding of divine holiness relate to His command that we be holy as He is holy? 1 Peter 1:16 echoes God's call to holiness found in Leviticus 19:2. If we understand divine holiness as the consequence of all of God's uniquely excellent character, Lev. 19:3ff make a whole lot more sense. The call to honor one's parents (v. 3), keep the Sabbaths (v. 3), avoid idolatry (v. 4), follow the rules for fellowship offerings carefully (vv. 5-8), care for the poor (vv. 9-10), to respect personal property and tell the truth (v. 11-12), to treat others with the same consideration you would desire (vv. 13-14), to care about justice (vv. 15-16), and to love others as yourself (vv. 17-18)—all of these ceremonial and ethical demands reflect aspects of the unique excellence of God's character and being. We are holy as He is holy by thinking, acting, and feeling as He feels. The consequence of being like God is that we too are separated from all that is evil unto all that is God. In other words, when the primary sense of divine holiness is mirrored in us, the secondary sense is its necessary consequence. When we are separate due to emulating the unique excellence of His character, we will necessarily be pure, good, and righteousness.

## ***God's Sanctification of Himself***

The second element of my study of God's holiness that intrigued me was the texts in which God says He will sanctify himself (Ezek. 38:23), He will be sanctified (Isa. 5:16; Ezek. 20:41; 28:22, 25; 36:23, 38:16; 39:27), or He commands men to sanctify Him (Isa. 8:13)

Ezekiel 38:23 is the key text in which God explicitly says he will sanctify himself: "I will magnify Myself [וַיְהַמְדֵּךְ לִי], and I will sanctify Myself [וַיְהַקְדִּשְׁתִּי], and I will make Myself known in the sight of many nations; and they will know that I am the LORD." The context of this statement is God's foretelling of the time when He will bring Gog upon his people Israel so that the nations may know Yahweh when He is sanctified [בְּהַקְדִּשְׁתִּי] through His destruction of Gog before their eyes (Ezek. 38:16).<sup>30</sup> Yahweh's wrath will be manifested in a great earthquake (v. 19), mountains collapsing with the entire earth and everything in it shaking (v. 20), and a torrential rain, with hailstones, fire, and brimstone (v. 22) that results in the total destruction of Gog. Through these fantastic displays of power, Yahweh will sanctify himself *in the sight of many nations*.

The phrase "in the sight of" occurs in most of the texts which speak of God sanctifying

(Exod. 3:15; Psa. 135:13; Isa. 26:8), while indicating semantic similarity, also suggests that there is semantic distinction.

<sup>30</sup> The connection between God's self-sanctification in v. 23 and his statement that he will be sanctified in v. 16 should not be missed. This provides a contextual basis for understanding that the *hitpa'el* and the *niphal* forms of *qadash* [קָדַשׁ] do not have essentially different senses. The *hitpa'el* is a reflexive and the *niphal* a passive expression of the same idea. On this basis then, we can identify other texts in which it is clear that the *niphal* forms of *qadash* [קָדַשׁ] indicate that Yahweh is sanctifying himself: Ezek. 20:41; 28:22, 25.



himself or of God being sanctified,<sup>31</sup> and it identifies the domain where the setting apart of God takes place: in the “eyes” or minds of a watching world. When God sanctifies himself, He is not altering something about himself. He is altering people’s perception of him. To those who do not know Yahweh, or have little regard for him, He is not transcendently separate from all other beings due to the unique excellence of his character and being. By acting in a way that clearly demonstrates the unique excellence of his righteousness, his wisdom, or his wrath, He elevates himself in their estimation, setting himself apart, i.e., sanctifying Himself.

## Sanctifying God

Not only does God sanctify Himself, but He requires us to sanctify him. This idea appears in the NT in 1 Peter 3:15, “but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts,” as well as the OT. Isaiah 8:13 is the text that most directly expresses a command to sanctify God: “Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself ....” Since God’s self-sanctification is his setting himself apart in the realm of people’s perception and estimation, it makes sense that our sanctification of God similarly involves setting him apart both in ours and others’ estimation.<sup>32</sup>

The OT explicitly identifies three ways in which people sanctify God: by obeying Him in all things (Lev. 10:3; 22:31-33),<sup>33</sup> by believing Him (Num. 20:12; 27:14),<sup>34</sup> and by fearing Him instead of the things the nations fear (Isa. 8:13; 29:23). We sanctify God, again, not by changing something about him, but by setting Him apart in our own minds as the uniquely excellent One who alone deserves our obedience, unwavering trust, and fear. When live out our obedience, faith, and godly fear, we sanctify God in the eyes of those who observe us as well. The practical ramifications of these texts for holy living are profound and worthy of sermon exploration.

By way of conclusion, allow me to suggest that the foregoing material helps explain the first petition in the Lord’s model prayer: “Hallowed be thy name.” “Hallowed” is Elizabethan English for “Let it be sanctified” (ἀγιασθήτω; Matt. 6:9). When we pray, “hallowed be thy

<sup>31</sup> Num. 20:12; 27:14; Ezek. 20:41; 28:25; 36:23; 38:16, 23; 39:27.

<sup>32</sup> Modern versions translate *sanctify* [קִדְּשׁ] in Isaiah 8:13 in the following ways: “regard as holy” (NASB, NIV, HCSB, RSV, NRSV), “account holy” (TNK), “honor as holy” (ESV), “recognize the authority of” (NET), and “make holy in your life” (NLT). These translations appear to reflect the conclusion that the *Hiphil* form of קִדְּשׁ has an estimative sense when God is the object (see also Num. 20:12; 27:14; Isa. 29:23). Although none of the six occurrences where non-divine persons are the object of the *Hiphil* form of קִדְּשׁ (Num. 3:13; 8:17; 1 Chron. 23:13; Jer. 1:5; 12:3; Zeph. 1:7) fit the profile of the declarative-estimative use of the *Hiphil*, the fact that God is already transcendently separate due to His unique excellence argues for an estimative sense of the verb.

<sup>33</sup> With regard to the Niphal forms of קִדְּשׁ, the Net Bible offers the following comment at Lev. 10:3, “The Niphal verb of the Hebrew root קִדְּשׁ (*qadash*) can mean either “to be treated as holy” (so here, e.g., BDB 873 s.v. קִדְּשׁ, LXX, NASB, and NEB) or “to show oneself holy” (so here, e.g., HALOT 1073 s.v. קִדְּשׁ nif.1, NIV, NRSV, NLT; J. Milgrom, *Leviticus* [AB], 1:595, 601–3; and J. E. Hartley, *Leviticus* [WBC], 133–34).” However, an inductive survey of simple *niphal* forms of קִדְּשׁ (*niqdash*) as well as *niqdash* + בִּי does not substantiate this claim. For example, *niqdash* + בִּי has the senses of “sanctified by” (Exo. 29:43; Isa. 5:16), “sanctified in” (Lev. 22:32; Num. 20:13; Ezek. 20:41; 28:22, 25; 36:23; 38:16; 39:27). Milgrom’s assertion (601–603) that *niqdash be-* must be reflexive when God is the subject (sanctify himself through) is certainly not a necessary conclusion from the data. A simple passive sense is possible and is attested in all instances by the LXX (except Isa. 5:16 where *niqdash* is translated by δοξασθήσεται “shall be glorified”).

<sup>34</sup> Note that whereas Num. 20:12 uses the *hiphil*, Deut. 32:51 uses the *piel* to refer to the exact same action.

name,” we are asking God to act in us and in the world in a way that displays his transcendent separateness due to the unique excellence of his character and being. We are also asking him to help us live so as to sanctify His name (reputation) before a watching world.

May His name be sanctified in us!

## Appendix 1

### Holiness and its Referents in the OT

Objects	Places	People	Times	Related Actions
<p>ground Ex. 3:5; Josh. 5:15</p> <p>garments Ex 28:2 - for priests; 28:3 - implication that the garment hallowed the priest (?) - or “for his consecration” (?) - necessary for ministry to God Ex 28:4</p> <p>sacrificial gifts Ex 28:38</p> <p>breast of wave offering was to be sanctified/consecrated Ex 29:27</p> <p>ram of atonement - not to be eaten by the זָר (stranger/layman?) Ex 29:33</p> <p>bread/flesh of consecration Ex 29:34 - □ not to be eaten the day after (1 Sam. 21:5)</p> <p>meat offering Lv 2:3</p> <p>sin &amp; trespass offering Lv 6:17</p> <p>peace offering Lv 19:8</p> <p>bread of first fruits &amp; the two lambs Lv 23:20</p> <p>heave offering Num. 18:19</p> <p>crown/diadem on priest’s turban Ex 29:6; 39:30</p> <p>everything associated with the tabernacle Ex 40:9</p> <p>temple 1 Kgs 9:3</p> <p>showbread 1 Sam. 21:5</p> <p>sacrificial altar Ex 29:36-37; 40:10</p> <p>altar of incense = most holy Ex 30:10</p> <p>anointing oil Ex 30:25; □ can’t make anything like it Ex 30:32</p> <p>the laver &amp; the priest’s foot Ex 40:11</p> <p>anything set apart for the Lord Lv 27:9; house 27:14; portion of a field 27:16;    to הָרָם Lv 27:21</p> <p>tabernacle vessels Num. 31:6</p> <p>censers of Korah <i>et al.</i> Num. 16:37</p> <p>tithe of the land/herd Lv 27:30, 32</p> <p>fruit of the land in the fourth year - implies that what is holy is set aside for God &amp; off limits to men Lv 19:24</p> <p>produce Dt. 22:9</p> <p>military camp Dt. 23:15</p> <p>silver and gold, bronze and iron Josh. 6:19; 2 Sam. 8:11</p> <p>seed (genetic material) Ezra 9:2</p> <p>the sheep gate Neh. 3:1</p> <p>throne Psa 47:9</p> <p>mountains Psa 87:1</p> <p>covenant Dan. 11:28</p> <p>meat Hag. 2:12</p> <p>horse bells Zech. 14:20</p> <p>pots Zech. 14:21</p>	<p>assembly Ex 12:16</p> <p>God’s dwelling place Ex 15:13</p> <p>Mt. Sinai - set boundaries &amp; sanctified it - Ex 19:23</p> <p>Holy place Ex 26:33</p> <p>Holiest place - note grades of holiness in approaching God Ex 26:33</p> <p>Sanctuary - by God’s glory - Ex 29:43</p> <p>cities of refuge - Jos. 20:7</p> <p>city of Jerusalem - Neh. 11:1</p> <p>Mt. Zion - Psa 2:6</p> <p>Heaven - Psa 20:7</p> <p>valley - Jer. 31:40</p> <p>land - Zech. 2:16</p>	<p>firstborn Ex 13:2; Nu 3:13</p> <p>God - “glorious in holiness” Ex 15:11</p> <p>God’s name is holy Lv 20:3</p> <p>Israelites - associated with washing themselves Ex 19:10,14; not to eat ‘road kill’</p> <p>the congregation Joel 2:16</p> <p>Priests - washing Ex 19:22</p> <p>Priests - so that they may minister to God Ex 28:41; not to be holy was a sin punishable by death Ex 28:43</p> <p>Priests - separated from the practices of heathen priests Lv 21.5-6</p> <p>A priest who had a physical impairment could not offer sacrifice before the Lord -- because Yahweh is holy Lv 21.23</p> <p>A nazirite’s head Nu 6.11</p> <p>Eliezar - 1 Sam. 7:1</p> <p>Jesse and sons 1 Sam. 16:5</p> <p>Job’s children – Job 1:5</p> <p>Aaron - Psa 106:16</p> <p>Christ - Isa. 6:3</p> <p>Jeremiah - Jer. 1:5</p>	<p>Sabbath Gn 2.3 no work Ex 16.23; keep it holy Ex 20.8; sign that “I am the Lord that sanctifies you” Ex 31.13; holy to you Ex 31.14; holy to the Lord Ex 31.15</p> <p>Feasts are a holy convocation Lv 23.2, 3, 4, 7ff –no work was to be done on a day of holy assemblage</p> <p>Year of Jubilee - no work of harvesting, they ate out of the field</p> <p>Day of reading Scripture Neh. 8:9</p>	<p>Holiness imparted by sprinkling of the blood Ex 29.21; Lv 8.15</p> <p>Whatever touched the altar was made holy Ex 29.37; anything touching the consecrated altar implements was holy. Ex 30.29</p> <p>Anointing oil used to sanctify/ consecrate items as holy Ex 40.9-13 (oil = Spirit ?)</p> <p>The use of strange fire did not treat God as holy. God demands that he be sanctified &amp; honored (note the parallel) by those who approach him Lv 10.3</p> <p>God’s people are to distinguish between the holy and unholy Lv 10.10</p> <p>Sanctifying of people contrasted with defiling themselves with unclean things Lv 11.44</p> <p>Eating the peace offering on the third day profanes the holy thing Lv 19.8</p> <p>Offering human sacrifice to idols profanes God’s holy name Lv 20.3</p> <p>Turning to mediums &amp; spiritists is the opp. of consecrating oneself to God and being holy (?) Lv 20.7</p> <p>Yahweh is the one who sanctifies his people Lv 20:8</p> <p>Marriage by a priest had to be to a virgin, not a widow, harlot, divorced woman -- he was to be holy Lv 21.15</p> <p>If a priest touched the holy things while unclean he was to be cut off from his people Lv 22.3-4</p> <p>Redemption of something given to the Lord demanded full price + 1/5<sup>th</sup> Lv 27.15</p> <p>Faith in God’s word treats God as holy; unbelief does not treat God as holy Nu 20.12</p> <p>God showed himself as holy at Meribah Nu 20.13</p> <p>Sanctify a fast Joel 2:15</p> <p>Sanctify war Joel 4:9 (Jer. 6:4; Mic. 3:5)</p> <p>Yahweh swears by his holiness (Psa. 89:36; Amos 4:2)</p>

## Appendix 2

### Holiness and its Referents in the NT

Objects	Places	People	Related Actions
<i>Tangible</i> Temple's gold – Matt. 23:17 Temple altar – Matt. 23:19 A sacrifice – Matt. 23:19; Rom. 12:1 Scriptures – Rom. 1:2 Bread dough & bread – Rom. 11:16 Tree roots & branches – Rom. 11:16 Human body – 1 Cor. 7:34 (non-ethical) Food – 1 Tim. 4:5	City (Jerusalem) – Matt. 4:5; 27:53; Rev. 11:2 City (New Jerusalem) – Rev. 21:2; 22:11 The temple – Matt. 23:17 Ground – Acts 7:33 Holy place – Heb. 9:1, 24 Holy of holies – Heb. 9:3 Mountain – 2 Pet. 1:18	God's Spirit (90+) – Matt. 1:18 God's people (saints; 60x) – Matt. 27:52 Jesus – Mk 1:24 - holy child – Luk. 1:35 - holy servant – Acts 4:27 John the Baptist – Mk 6:20 Angels – Mk 8:38; Luk. 9:26; Rev. 14:10 Prophets – Luk. 1:70; Eph. 3:5; 2 Pet. 3:2 Firstborn males – Luk. 2:23 God the Father – John 17:11 All believers as God's temple – 1 Cor. 3:17; Eph. 2:20 Unbelieving husband & children of believing wife – 1 Cor. 7:14 Human spirit – 1 Cor. 7:34x Apostles – Eph. 3:5 The church (all believers) – Eph. 5:27 Brothers – Heb. 3:1 Women – 1 Tim. 2:15; 1 Pet. 3:5 Priesthood (God's people) – 1 Pet. 2:5 Nation (God's people) – 1 Pet. 2:9 Participants in the first resurrection – Rev. 20:6	Kiss – Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:20; 1 Thess. 5:26 Conduct – 1 Thess. 4:4; 1 Pet. 1:15; 2 Pet. 3:11
<i>Intangible</i> Truth – Matt. 7:6 God's name/reputation Matt. 6:9 Covenant – Luk. 1:72 God's law/commandment – Rom. 7:12; 2 Pet. 2:21 Faith – Jude 1:20			

# How Can I, a Fallible Fallen Human, Be Holy?

(The meaning of holiness)

2010 Chamberlain Holiness Lectures

Wesley Biblical Seminary

Dr. Allan P. Brown

**Scripture<sup>1</sup>: 1 Peter 1:13-16:** <sup>13</sup>Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober *in spirit*, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>14</sup> As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance, <sup>15</sup> but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; <sup>16</sup> because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY."

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## Outline:

1. The Command to be holy.
2. The Characteristics of holiness.
3. The Constraints of holiness on our daily lives.

## Introduction:

Peter is writing his Epistle to people who were saved. They had repented of their sins and were walking with God. To establish this fact, let's read verses 1-9 of chapter 1. I have placed in boldface type and underlined the phrases that reveal Peter believed his readers to be saved.

**1 Peter 1:1-9:** <sup>1</sup>Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen <sup>2</sup>according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. <sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you <sup>5</sup>who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup>In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; <sup>8</sup>and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice

<sup>1</sup> Scripture is from the New American Standard Version, 1995 edition.

with joy inexpressible and full of glory, <sup>9</sup>obtaining as **the outcome of your faith** the salvation of your souls.

A message on the importance of holiness frequently evokes a negative response from people who do not really understand what the Bible means by the terms “holy, holiness, and sanctification.” On one memorable occasion, as I concluded a Bible study on this subject, the leader of the organization concluded the service with words that went something like this: “Thank you, Dr. Brown, for your message on holiness. We do need to remember, however, that no one is perfect.” Thus he summed up and dismissed the entire concept. What I learned from his comments is that in the future, before I deliver a message on holiness, I need to see if I can achieve some unanimity of opinion on the following two propositions: 1) no one’s perfect (incapable of improving), and 2) we are only fallible, fallen humans (limited and frail). If we can agree on these two propositions, perhaps we will be able to hear God’s Word speaking to our hearts. It is to imperfect, limited, frail humans that God commands: “Be ye holy.” And I think it is reasonable to believe that when God issues a command to fallen humans, He will also supply the necessary grace and power to enable them to obey!

- I. **The Command to be holy:** vs.15 “but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior”

There are at least four Biblical reasons why God’s people are to be holy.

**A. God’s creative purpose is for His people to be holy:**

**Ephesians 1:4:** Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.

**B. God’s expressed will is that His people be holy:**

**1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7:** For this is the will of God, your sanctification [your holiness]; *that is*, that you abstain from sexual immorality . . . For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.

**C. God’s people must be holy in order to enter heaven.**

**Hebrews 12:14:** Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification [holiness] without which no one will see the Lord.

**D. God commands His people to be holy.**

**1 Peter 1:15:** But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior;

***“As oxygen is necessary to sustain physical life, so holiness is necessary to sustain spiritual life.”***

## **II. The Characteristics of holiness.**

There are three essential components to consider when discussing human holiness. In order for a human to be holy in a salvific sense, he must first be connected to the source of holiness, God Himself. As a result of this connection with God, he is separated (or set apart) unto God from that which is sinful or defiles. This connection and resulting separation enables him to share in the life of a holy God with the goal of becoming as Christlike as possible. Let's examine these three essential components of human holiness.

### **1. To be holy I must be CONNECTED to the SOURCE of holiness—God Himself.**

All holiness finds its origin and source in God alone. Revelation 15:4 says, “Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For *You* alone *are* holy.” Nothing is holy in a biblical sense until it is connected to the origin and source of holiness—God himself. There is no holiness independent of His holiness. The holiness of persons, things, days, and places is derived and sustained only by being in a special relationship with the holy God.

For this reason, all born-again Christians are said to be holy. They are connected to the source of holiness, the holy God, through the new birth. For example, in Colossians 1:27 Paul writes, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Again, we read in Colossians 3:3, “For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” If you are born again, Christ is in you and you are in God and that relationship makes you holy.

God desires His children to understand that their primary identification as Christians is the descriptor “saints,” literally meaning “holy ones.” This description occurs sixty times in the New Testament.

### **2. When God makes me holy, God separates me (“sets me apart”) in three important senses:**

#### **a. I am SEPARATED TO God as His possession – His special treasure.**

When God brought His redeemed people to Mt. Sinai, God said to them, “You shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people ... a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5-6). The relationship the nation of Israel had with God as a result of their deliverance from Egyptian slavery made the nation holy. And as an integral part of holiness, God claims that which he sanctifies as His special treasure. He sets apart that which is holy for Himself.

That holiness involves the concept of separation is seen in Leviticus 20:24, 26, “Hence I have said to you, ‘You are to possess their land, and I Myself will give it to you to possess it, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ I am the LORD your God, who has separated you (אֲשֶׁר־הִבַּלְתִּי)

from the peoples. . . . “Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy; and I have set you apart (וַאֲבָדְלָהֶם) from the peoples to be Mine.”

When a person gets saved, he is connected to the source of Holiness, God Himself, and God separates that person unto Himself thereby claiming him as His own property. Paul communicated this truth to the Corinthians when he wrote, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

God has a right to do what He wants with His property! This means, He has the right to tell us how to live. And He tells us that we are to live out the holy position He has given us by becoming holy in every aspect of our life.

**b. God requires those who are holy to SEPARATE FROM that which is sinful or defiles.**

Because we are connected to the source of holiness, God himself, and as such are separated unto God as His personal possession, God requires that you and I be separate from that which is sinful or that which defiles us in His eyes. In Leviticus 10:3 we read, “By those who come near Me I must be sanctified [regarded as holy]; And before all the people I must be glorified.” In Exodus 19:22 God warned the priests, “Let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate [sanctify] themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.” In order to draw near to a holy God, we must be holy.

The Israelites evidently understood this principle, for we read in Ezra 6:21 that the people who wished to participate in the Lord’s Passover “separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land in order to seek the LORD, the God of Israel.”

The truth that God requires those who are holy to separate from that which is sinful or defiles is also emphasized in the New Testament. Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians that it “is God’s will that you should be sanctified [be holy]: that you should avoid sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3). After further instruction about how to properly conduct oneself, he explains, “God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life” (1 Thess. 4:7). Holiness requires moral purity.

To the Corinthians believers Paul wrote, “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘And do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,’ Says the Lord Almighty.” Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor 6:16-7:1).<sup>2</sup> Notice

<sup>2</sup> Underlining added for emphasis.



the connection between the call for separation from that which is not in harmony with being a temple of God and the call for personal cleansing from anything that would defile us and the on-going responsibility of “perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

God demands moral purity from Christians because separation from that which is sinful or defiles is an integral aspect of being a holy person. In harmony with this principle, Peter wrote, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives” (2 Peter 3:10-11).

**c. God has the right to ask those who are holy to SEPARATE FROM anything in the area of the common or ordinary if He knows it will hinder a Christian’s spiritual growth and development, or hinder the Christian’s testimony.**

The Biblical connection between holiness and separation from the common or ordinary is seen in the historical event of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3:5). A common, ordinary bush, rooted in common, ordinary ground was changed into a holy bush, and holy ground. What caused the change? The manifest presence of the Holy God came into contact with the common and ordinary, thus transforming it into the category of the holy.

God commanded the priesthood within the nation of Israel to learn how to discern the difference between the common and the holy. In Leviticus 10:10 we read, “You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean.” That the priesthood failed to learn this difference and also failed to teach Israel the difference between the holy and the common is revealed by Ezekiel. He writes, “Her [Israel’s] priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them” (Ezekiel 22:26). Ezekiel urged the priests to correct this serious omission. He further wrote, “They [the priests] are to teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean” (Ezekiel 44:23).

This aspect of separation from the common or ordinary which is associated with the concept of holiness means there does not have to be something intrinsically wrong or sinful with an attitude or action or pursuit before God has the right to ask a Christian to stop it. God has the right to separate His holy people from any common or ordinary thing that He knows will not be good for them spiritually, or that He knows will hurt their testimony and consequent usefulness in His kingdom.

**3. To be holy means I SHARE in the nature of God – I partake of the divine nature with the goal of becoming Christlike (2 Pet. 1:4; Rom. 8:29).**

Holy living is a way of behaving, patterned after the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and is expected of all Christians. Peter writes that God's "divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust" (2 Pet. 1:3-4). As partakers of the divine nature, we are privileged to share in the very life of God Himself. Such participation with a holy God requires that we be holy in every area of our lives.

It would be difficult for us to understand fully what God expected from imperfect, fallen humans in His requirements for holiness if it were not for the example of Christ. Jesus, through his incarnation and life on earth, has shown us what holiness in human flesh looks like. He is the exact image of his holy Father (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:3). Therefore we may say that human holiness expresses itself in Christlike attitudes and behavior.<sup>3</sup>

What was the attitude and behavior pattern of Jesus? His fundamental passion and purpose was to do the will of God. We must remember, however, that a passion is more than a willingness. Listen to these statements that Jesus made. "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:34). "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given me to do" (John 17:4). "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God" (Hebrews 10:9). At the foundation of Christlikeness is a passion to fulfill the will of God.

The will of God for our lives is primarily revealed in Scripture. Leviticus 20:7-8 teaches us that there is an inseparable relationship between holiness and obedience to Scripture. God said, "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God, and you shall keep My statutes, and perform them: I am the Lord who sanctifies you." Again in Leviticus 22:31-32 we read, "you shall keep My commandments, and do them: I am the LORD. And you shall not profane My holy name, but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel: I am the LORD who sanctifies you." In the very same breath that God commands us to be holy, He commands us to obey His word. Holiness is displayed by obedience to God's Word.<sup>4</sup>

A holy person is a person who is obedient to Scripture. You can't knowingly be violating the Word of God, and say, "I am holy." It's a contradiction of terms.

**III. The Constraints of holiness. 1 Peter 1:13-14:** "Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober *in spirit*, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance."

<sup>3</sup> For a scriptural description of how we should display Christlikeness, see 1 Peter 2:20-24, Ephesians 5:1-2, and Philippians 2:5-8.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 19 is an explanation by various examples of how to translate holiness into every aspect of human behavior

Peter tells us that holy people are obedient people. Further, they are committed to stop being conformed to this world. Conformity to the world came as a result of the desires they sought to satisfy before they were saved. Holy people, says Peter, are “not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance.” Peter’s statement is similar to Paul’s statement in Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” Both Peter and Paul are warning against worldliness. Worldliness may be defined as any attitude, action, or behavior that does not conform to God’s Word.

### **Summary of basic concepts:**

1. The basic idea of holiness or sanctification is “SEPARATION” – to be “set apart.”
2. Holiness begins the moment I am connected to the SOURCE of holiness—God himself.
3. Holiness involves a three-fold SEPARATION: separation to God as His possession; separation from that which is sinful or defiles me in God’s eyes, and separation from the common, the ordinary.
4. Holiness means I SHARE in the nature of God— I partake of the divine nature with the goal of becoming Christlike (2 Pet. 1:4; Rom. 8:29).
5. Therefore, holiness defines an association with God, a life of separation, and a way of behaving—“be holy in all your behavior” (1 Pet. 1:15, 16).

# Entire Sanctification: Cleansing and On-Going Obedience

2010 Chamberlain Holiness Lectures  
Wesley Biblical Seminary  
Dr. Allan P. Brown

## Scriptures:

**Psalms 51:5-8, 10.** “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.”

**1 Thessalonians 5:23-24:** Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

## Introduction

In evangelical circles, few if any question whether mankind is depraved in his fallen state or whether inherited depravity remains in the life of a believer. The questions that do engender debate are “Can inherited depravity be cleansed while a believer lives?” and, if it can, “What is the nature of this cleansing?” The answer to these questions hinges, in part, upon how one defines inherited depravity.

In what follows, I offer a definition of inherited depravity, sketch my understanding of key elements of the image of God in mankind in relation to inherited depravity, and explain my understanding of God’s plan to remedy our inherited depravity and restore His image in us.

## I. A Definition of Inherited Depravity

Many definitions for inherited depravity have been suggested, including rebellion, greed, pride, selfish ambition, self-sovereignty and the like. The primary terms the Bible uses are “sin” (Rom. 7:8), the “law of sin” (Rom. 7:23), the “flesh” (Rom. 7:18; 8:1) and “fleshly minded” (Rom. 8:6).

While the metaphors and metaphorical language Scripture uses to describe inherited depravity may suggest substance models in which inherited depravity is viewed as a “thing,” that is, an addition to man, a second or additional “nature,” I believe such models are fatally flawed and should be rejected.

My best understanding of Scripture is that inherited depravity is the self-centeredness that resulted when Adam severed his relationship with God and forfeited the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit through willful sin. As a result of Adam’s sin,

God ceased being the unifying center of his life. Self took the place of God, and Adam became totally depraved—a condition of complete self-centeredness.

I use the phrase “total depravity” in the sense that the Fall affected every part of our being (spirit, soul, and body). However, because of God’s restraining and enabling grace, no one is born incapable of learning how to do good. Romans 3:10-18 is the classic passage that describes how wicked our inner corruption would make us if it were not for God’s prevenient and restraining grace.

- <sup>10</sup> There is none righteous, not even one;
- <sup>11</sup> There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God;
- <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one."
- <sup>13</sup> "Their throat is an open grave, With their tongues they keep deceiving," "The poison of asps is under their lips";
- <sup>14</sup> "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness";
- <sup>15</sup> "Their feet are swift to shed blood,
- <sup>16</sup> Destruction and misery are in their paths,
- <sup>17</sup> And the path of peace have they not known."
- <sup>18</sup> "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

As a result of Adam’s sin, all his posterity inherited this depravity.

What was mankind like before the tragic Fall? Let’s think about it for a moment.

### **A. Mankind Before the Fall**

Mankind was created in the image of the triune God (Gen.1:26-27).

The *Shema*’ of Deuteronomy 6:4 provides a clear starting point for understanding what it means to be in the image of God: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one” (see also Isa. 44:6). God is one, and there is no other.

In the unity of His Being, the one God reveals himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one God, who is holy, blessed, and an undivided Trinity, exists as three distinct Persons. Further, God reveals that within the Triune Godhead, each Divine Person is holy and relates to the other Divine Persons in love (1 John 4:8; Lev. 11:44). The early church spoke of the triune relationship as a “perichoretic unity,” a holy relationship of mutual indwelling, mutual self-giving, others oriented, love.

When God made mankind, He made male and female in His image. It is important to observe that it took two human persons, male and female, to reflect the image of God in humans.

How did the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, relate to one another? Since they were made in the image of God, they most likely reflected the relationship that the three Persons of the Triune Godhead enjoyed: a holy, loving relationship. Adam and Eve, in imitation of their Creator, expressed their love for each other and for God in terms of self-giving that seeks the other person's highest good.

When God looked upon all He had created at the end of the creation week, He pronounced it "very good" (Gen. 1:31). We may infer from this that Adam and Eve had totally satisfying relationships—with God, with themselves (self-image), with each other, and with their environment.

Their relationship with God was one of joyous total submission: for their lives were totally yielded to his control. As they obeyed God their conduct was completely righteous. Their crowning privilege and supreme joy was intimate fellowship with Him. And because John 17:3 defines eternal life as knowing God, they had eternal life.

Their relationship with God brought with it an enlightened understanding of spiritual things, enkindled emotions of love and appreciation for God, and enabled wills that were wholly inclined to do His will. They intuitively and intellectually knew truth and perceived the inherent rightness of the arrangement.

Further, Adam and Eve enjoyed an integrated personality. They felt loved, accepted, and secure in God's love. Their world-view was God-centered, and they were emotionally balanced because they lived with no guilt.

All of this was enjoyed in a perfect and sinless environment with a perfect mind and a sinless body.

## **B. Mankind After the Fall**

Because of the Fall, all mankind's relationships were severely damaged.

First, mankind's holy relationship with God was severed. God's sovereignty (lordship) had been rejected and self-sovereignty usurped His place. Disobedience to God resulted in ungodly character and unrighteous behavior (Rom. 1:18). Because of their broken relationship with God, the supreme source of joy and satisfaction was missing from their life. They had forfeited eternal life and were now spiritually dead in trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1). The absence of God's sanctifying presence resulted in the darkening of their understanding, the deadening of their emotions and the degrading of their wills (Eph. 4:17-18). Mankind no longer intuitively and intellectually knew truth. Thinking themselves to be wise they became fools (Romans 1:21-22).

Second, they no longer enjoyed an integrated personality. Making self the supreme source of reference, Adam and Eve felt self-conscious, unaccepted and insecure. Their world-view was distorted. Guilt and fear caused them to hide from the presence of God and expressed itself in self-defensiveness (Gen. 3:8-10).

Third, their relationship with each other was warped. No longer reflecting the true image of God, Adam became a self-loving, self-defensive, self-protecting leader. Eve likewise became a self-loving companion who now desired to rule over her husband.<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, Adam's sin brought death into the world (Romans 5:12) and the whole created order was adversely affected (Romans 8:20-22). Due to self-sovereignty expressing itself in self-centeredness, mankind now futilely tries to find meaning and satisfaction in the individual components of life as graphically described in the Book of Ecclesiastes—through personal achievement, self-gratification, fame, money, music, sex, power—not realizing that meaning and satisfaction can be found only in a personal relationship with the Creator (Eccl. 12:1).

## **II. The Transmission and Consequences of Inherited Depravity.**

The Psalmist tells us that when children are conceived, they are conceived “in sin,” (Psa. 51:5), meaning they too inherit depravity. “Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies” (Psa. 58:3). Isaiah, the primary source for understanding inherited depravity in terms of self-centeredness, describes our problem in terms of wayward sheep. He said in Isaiah 53:6 “all of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” Why do we all go astray—all of us follow after sinful pursuits? Isaiah answers, “We have turned every one to his own way” (Isa. 53:6). In our fallen condition, we come hard-wired, from the moment of concept, with a compulsive desire to have our own way. We not only want our own way, we are driven by the desire to have it.

As a result, we are born spiritually dead and are by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). We have neither the saving presence of God in our lives, nor the knowledge of His ways. As a result of our self-centeredness, we reject the One whose face we are supposed to seek and in whose light we are supposed to live.

Martin Luther expressed the depraved condition of mankind in a very graphic way when he defined it as *cor incurvatus ad se* (the heart turned in upon itself). Instead of turning to God from whom we came, we turn to ourselves in an effort to find what we need. Turning away from the Source of all that is good, we turn inward and try to live life out of our own resources and for ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the term “desire” in Genesis 3:16 and compare it to the same term in Genesis 4:7. I understand “desire” in these two contexts to mean “the desire to rule over” or to “exercise mastery over.”

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Kinlaw, *We Live as Christ* (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 2001), 32.

As a result all types of evil become possible. Jesus said that from such a self-centered heart proceeds “evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man” (Mark 7:21-23, NASB). All of the natural propensities, needs, and potentialities of mankind are twisted in an egocentric and sinful direction.

Paul frequently refers to this condition of self-centeredness as living “in the flesh.” In contrast, He speaks of the Christian as living “in the Spirit.” He writes, “The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another” (Gal. 5:17). They are in opposition because the Holy Spirit, like Jesus, will not operate independently of our heavenly Father, whereas the chief characteristic of the “flesh” is self-centered independence from God.

Paul further says that the person who has his mind set on the flesh cannot please God, is hostile toward God, and will experience spiritual death (Rom. 8:6-8). Jeremiah, using a slightly different metaphor, says that the very center of man’s depraved being, the heart, is “more deceitful than all else” and “desperately sick” (Jer. 17:9). Apart from the grace of God, fallen humanity has no other choice than to find their identity in their self-centered existence and seek their purpose and meaning in life independent of God.

God’s remedy for inherited depravity is to restore in mankind the image of God that was so horribly warped and distorted by the Fall. (Col. 3:10). The first stages in this restoration occur at the new birth.

### **III. The New Birth: God’s Remedy for Inherited Depravity Begun.**

When, by the grace of God, a repentant sinner exercises saving faith, God not only pardons his transgressions (justification) but actually makes him a new creature in Christ Jesus (sanctification - Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17).<sup>3</sup> Simultaneous with this event many things happen to the new Christian, including adoption into the family of God (John 1:12; Gal. 4:5), and union with Christ (John 15; Rom. 6). Because of our union with Christ we are declared to be dead to sin and freed from it (Rom. 6:2, 4, 7).

Notice the contrasts that Paul distinguishes between the saved man of Romans 6 and Romans 8 and the wretched man of Romans 7:14-25 in the chart below.

<sup>3</sup> Sanctification is a broad term. It refers to the gracious working of God in us through the Holy Spirit whereby he transforms us into the likeness of Christ. The transforming work of sanctification begins at the moment of the new birth and culminates with glorification, at the Second Coming of Christ.



<b>The Wretched Man of Romans 7:14-25</b>	<b>The Saved Man of Romans 6 and 8</b>
He is carnal, sold under sin and therefore as a slave to sin is still being controlled by it (7:14).	He is no longer the slave of sin (6:6). He has died to sin and cannot live any longer in it (6:2). His union with Christ in His death to sin means that he is freed from sin (6:7).
He does what he hates and knows he is displeasing God (7:15, 19).	He walks in newness of life (6:4). He does not walk in the flesh, but in the Spirit and the Spirit dwells in him (8:9)
He is not able to do what he knows is right (7:15, 19).	He has been set free from sin, is the servant of God, and produces the fruit of holiness (6:22)
There is a desire to do right, but no accompanying power to do right (7:16, 18).	Sin no longer has dominion over him (6:14). He fulfills the righteous requirements of the law as he walks in the Spirit (8:4).
The law of sin is controlling him (7:20) and resisting the law of his mind (7:23).	He has been set free from the law of sin and death that used to control him (8:2). He is no longer to let sin reign in his body and is not to obey it (6:12).
He is a captive of the law of sin (7:23).	He is no longer the slave of sin (6:20). He used to be the slave of sin, but he has been delivered from the slavery of sin (6:17).
He is a wretched man who is miserably unhappy because of his sin (7:24).	He experiences no condemnation because He lives in Christ (8:1).
He is a divided person: His mind serves the law of God, but his flesh serves the law of sin (7:25).	He has been set free from sin and is now the servant of righteousness (6:18).

The person we were in our unregenerate state, a person controlled by the “flesh,” is now said to be crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20). As a result of his union with Christ, “the flesh with its affections and lusts” has been crucified (Gal. 5:24). The tyrannizing power of the “flesh,” as described in Romans 7:14-25, is broken.

At the moment of the new birth, we put off the “old man” and put on the “new man” which is “created in righteousness and true holiness,” and subsequently we are being “renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created” us (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10).

Concomitant with and central to the restoration of God’s image in us comes the call to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Mat. 22:37-40). With the call comes God’s grace that enables us to begin to learn what is involved in a total love for God and a love for our neighbor as we love ourselves.

This aspect of the restoration of God's image coincides with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit—the work of transforming us into the likeness of Christ—that begins in the new birth. First Corinthians 1:2, and 6:11 call believers “sanctified” in this sense.<sup>4</sup>

Progressive sanctification follows (Heb. 2:11). We are being sanctified (further transformation into the likeness of Christ) as we continue our walk with Christ. As one walks in the light (1 John 1:7), the Holy Spirit will eventually bring to the Christian's attention the need to be entirely sanctified (1 Thess. 5:23-24). The response of the Christian to this further information should be one of gratitude wherein they gladly present themselves as a living, holy, acceptable, sacrifice to God. This involves a deliberate and full consecration to God of his or her new life in Christ (Rom. 6:13; 12:1), with a complete transfer of control to God. As a result of their obedience and faith, God cleanses the believer's heart of the remaining self-centeredness (Acts 15:9).

#### **IV. Entire Sanctification: God's Provision for Cleansing from Inherited Depravity Completed.**

For some, the awareness of the need to be entirely sanctified will come through the reading or preaching of Scripture. For others, it will come through an awareness of inward desires and longings that are displeasing to God and hinder one from loving God totally. Dr. Dennis Kinlaw, describing his discovery of remaining self-centeredness in his life, wrote, “I was a believer; I knew Christ. But I kept a finger on a corner of my life and I wanted to do a little bargaining with God about what He did with me.” [See Dennis Kinlaw, *We Live As Christ*, (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 2001), 14]. It was through a growing awareness of not being totally surrendered to God in every respect, that Dr. Kinlaw came to see his need for a thorough cleansing from remaining self-centeredness in his life. He was motivated to make a full surrender to God and consequently experienced the fullness of the Spirit whereby his heart was thoroughly cleansed and he received power to be the witness God wanted him to be (Acts. 1:8).

Whether one recognizes the problem of self-centeredness (inherited depravity) or not, God's command that believers be “filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18) is His solution to this problem. Being filled with the Spirit involves the cleansing of one's inner attitude, disposition and motivation from the principle of self-centeredness through a full surrender to God (Rom. 12:1) and an empowerment to be the witness Jesus wants us to be (Acts 1:8). This is what I understand Paul to be talking about in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 when he prays that God would entirely sanctify His children.

The term “entire” in front of “sanctification” often confuses people. Is Paul implying in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 that after entire sanctification there will be no further progress in sanctification? Absolutely not. When he uses the adverb *entire*, he is speaking of a work of God's sanctifying grace that encompasses *every part of man*:

<sup>4</sup> See also Acts 20:32; 26:18; Hebrews 10:10

“spirit, soul, and body.” The word *spirit*, in this context, refers to the inner chamber of your being (i.e., your heart), the control panel out of which your thoughts and motives proceed. The word *soul* includes your mind, will, and emotions. These must be cleansed of self-centeredness and consecrated for God's glory. The word *body* refers to the physical, material, fleshly part of man that is to be used only for His honor and glory, in harmony with His Word. The term *entire* does not mean you become as sanctified (Christlike) as it is possible for a human to be (intensively sanctified). Rather it means every part of you is sanctified (extensively sanctified), spirit, soul, and body. No aspect of your being is excluded from God's work of entire sanctification.

## **V. The Cleansing of Inherited Depravity: Distinguishing the Principle from its Consequences.**

In entire sanctification, the remaining self-centeredness in the Christian's life (inherited depravity) is cleansed (Acts 15:9) when we unconditionally surrender ourselves to God as a holy, living sacrifice, thereby yielding ourselves to the indwelling Spirit's full control (Rom. 12:1; Eph. 5:18). The phrase “full control” is not speaking of the Holy Spirit “making” a Christian do something contrary to his will. There is nothing coercive about the Holy Spirit. Rather, it speaks of a willing, on-going, moment-by-moment surrender and obedience to whatever changes the Spirit wishes to make in the Christian's life.

### **A. Why the need for an on-going cleansing after we are entirely sanctified?**

At this point in our study, it becomes very important to distinguish between God's cleansing our hearts of the principle of self-centeredness at the moment of entire sanctification and from the needed on-going cleansing of the mental and emotional consequences of self-centeredness that occur as we continue to walk in the light after we are entirely sanctified. There are programmed habits, ways of thinking, and responses to stimuli that became part of our personality while living under the tyranny of self-centeredness. For example, some people grew up in an extremely competitive environment and were taught either by example or precept that “winning” is not only desirable, it is crucial for self-esteem. Such competitiveness becomes a compulsive, controlling, way of life and shows up in attitudes and activities associated with games, grades, interpersonal relationship, and ends up permeating every aspect of life, including spiritual activities.

After conversion, the Holy Spirit works in the believer's life to transform his thinking (to renew him “in knowledge” -- Col. 3:10) and to bring to his attention changes that need to be made. The Holy Spirit will direct him and empower him to make these changes. This process continues after entire sanctification. As long as the fully surrendered, entirely sanctified person walks in the light, he is not guilty of conscious or willful self-centeredness, for he is being kept cleansed from all sin (1 John 1:7) and from God's point of view is declared “blameless” (1 Thess. 3:13). Further, the image of God

has been restored in the believer's life in the sense that his primary motive now is to please Jesus in everything (Col. 1:9) and to love God and others as he should. The manifestations of this love will improve as the Christian continues to walk in the Spirit and continues to make the adjustments that the Holy Spirit indicates need to be made.<sup>5</sup> The process of sanctification (making the Christian Christlike in every respect) continues after entire sanctification. We shall not be completely like Him until we see Him as He is at His Second Coming (1 John 3:1-3).

**B. An analogy to illustrate the need for our on-going cleansing after entire sanctification.**

The following analogy may help clarify the sense in which a fully surrendered, entirely sanctified, Spirit-filled Christian is continually kept cleansed from self-centeredness. Consider a piece of thin plastic pipe that was originally straight but has become bent in upon itself and hardened in this condition. The bend is analogous to our in-born, inherited, self-centeredness (Psa. 51:5; Isa 53:6). In order to restore the pipe to its original straight condition, we can run hot water through it to soften it and (allow gravity to) pull the bend out of the pipe until it is straight. The hot water (and gravity) is analogous to the cleansing power and influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. [Jesus himself used the metaphor of flowing water to represent the Holy Spirit in a person's life. He is likened to a river of flowing water (cf. John 7:38-39)].

When we were saved, the Holy Spirit entered our lives and began straightening the pipe (Rom. 8:9-11). Some bend (self-centeredness) still remained, but it was no longer ruling our life. When we presented our bodies to God as a living, holy sacrifice, we chose to appropriate by faith what was declared to be true of us through our union with Christ—our death to sin and our freedom from it (Rom. 6:2, 7, 18). We acted upon the exhortations to “reckon ourselves indeed dead unto sin but alive unto God” (Rom. 6:11), and to present ourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness to God (Rom. 6:13, 19). We asked the Holy Spirit to take full uncontested control of our life and by faith we received the fullness of the Spirit.

In our analogy, the fullness of the Spirit (His full control of us) is what was necessary to take the remaining bend (self-centeredness) out of the pipe. As long as the Holy Spirit has full control, the pipe will continue to be straight (no self-centeredness). However, since self-centeredness is not a “substance” or a “thing,” its cleansing does not produce a static state of being. Being cleansed of self-centeredness (inherited depravity) is not the equivalent of removing a tree stump from the ground. Once a tree stump has been removed, there is no danger of it sending forth any growth. Nor is being cleansed of self-centeredness analogous to the removal of cancer from the body. Rather, the cleansing of self-centeredness is the consequence of a dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit that must be maintained moment-by-moment. Continual yielding to the Spirit's control

<sup>5</sup> He usually reveals these needs through interaction with other people.

allows us to remain continually free from the inner bent to self and remain submissive to God. However, if we resist the Spirit and don't cooperate with His checks and prompts, just as the pipe will revert to its bent condition if the hot water no longer runs through it, we too will revert to living according to self-centered desires. There is nothing "automatic" about maintaining a fully surrendered, Spirit-filled life. Many times each day one must choose to make self-denying choices as one takes up his cross and follows Christ (Mat. 16:24).

**C. Warning: a return to self-centered living is a real threat to the entirely sanctified.**

The warnings in Scripture to watch and pray, and to keep on the whole armor of God suggest that a return to self-centeredness is a real threat to the entirely sanctified believer (Eph. 6:10-20). Paul exhorts us that as we yield to the Spirit and walk in the Spirit, we must continually put to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13). This implies that there is no deliverance in this life from the temptation to return to self-centered living and once again start living in the flesh. Maintaining flesh free living is possible only in a vital relationship of walking in and being led by the Spirit, that is, living each moment in obedience to His voice as He speaks to us through His Word and through our conscience.

**VI. Maintaining entire sanctification: a dynamic relationship of on-going submissive obedience to the Holy Spirit.**

The need for an entirely sanctified person to maintain a dynamic relationship of submissive obedience to the Holy Spirit can be illustrated by an analogy of driving a car. To some people, the idea of a fully surrendered life would be the equivalent of removing ourselves from the driver's seat and letting the Holy Spirit drive. That would eliminate the stress of decision making. It would let us take a passive role. Instead, the Holy Spirit insists that we stay in the driver's seat. He is going to ride with us, but He is going to tell us what to do. So He issues instructions (through the Word and through our conscience in the form of prompts and checks), and we, as the driver, decide moment-by-moment whether or not we will submit to His control.

This analogy highlights the fact that the fullness of the Spirit is not a simplistic "let go and let God have His way," a one-time decision that becomes automatic from that point forward. There is nothing automatic about it. A person who has fully surrendered to the control of the Holy Spirit must live out his surrender in moment-by-moment obedience. As he moment-by-moment submits to the Spirit's control he experiences a moment-by-moment cleansing from self-centeredness.

## Conclusion

When the Psalmist prayed, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me” (Psa. 51:10), he chose a Hebrew verb (“create”) that is limited to God’s activity. No one, apart from God, can create in fallen creatures a clean heart. A clean heart is a heart that is cleansed not only from the guilt of sinful behavior, but also cleansed from the pollution of self-centeredness. Once God has created in us a clean heart, it remains clean only as we continue to walk in all the light that God’s Word and Spirit sheds on our pathway. A clean heart begins with getting saved, and is furthered by entire sanctification. After entire sanctification, it is maintained only by the on-going cleansing of the Holy Spirit as we submit to His further illumination of our minds to Scripture as well as to His prompts and checks.

Have you been entirely sanctified? If you have, are you maintaining the dynamic relationship of on-going cleansing by a moment-by-moment obedient walk in the Spirit?

# Is a Wesleyan Interpretation of 1 Thess. 5:23 Exegetically Tenable?: Responding to Reformed Critiques

Chamberlain Holiness Lectures  
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A. Philip Brown II, PhD

Αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης ἀγιάσαι ὑμᾶς ὁλοτελεῖς, καὶ ὁλόκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ  
ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀμέμπτως ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τηρηθεῖν.  
πιστὸς ὁ καλῶν ὑμᾶς, ὃς καὶ ποιήσῃ. ~ 1 Thess. 5:23-24

This lecture represents an effort to listen to, learn from, and engage with reformed critiques<sup>1</sup> of the Wesleyan doctrine of “entire sanctification.”<sup>2</sup> Methodologically, reformed critiques of entire sanctification normally focus on theological objections rather than exegetical objections to specific texts. Therefore, the first section of this lecture briefly addresses key theological objections raised by reformed theologians. The second and main section engages B. B. Warfield’s exegesis of 1 Thess. 5:23-24 and offers an exegetical defense for the plausibility of understanding the passage as a prayer for God to sanctify believers entirely *in this life*.<sup>3</sup>

## **Legitimate Reformed Objections and Potential Wesleyan Remedies**

Though reformed theologians often raise multiple objections to the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification,<sup>4</sup> the most significant appear to be the following three objections:

Objection 1: Wesleyans lower the standard of God’s law, or lower the standard of perfection, or alter the law to which we are held accountable.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The following theologically conservative reformed theologians were surveyed: Charles Hodge: *Systematic Theology*; A. A. Hodge: *Outlines of Theology*; Robert L. Dabney: *Systematic and Polemic Theology*; Henry B. Smith: *System of Christian Theology*; A. H. Strong: *Systematic Theology*; Louis Berkhof: *Systematic Theology*; Robert Reymond: *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*; Wayne Grudem: *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>2</sup> Most reformed systematics treat “entire sanctification” under the heading of “perfectionism,” and include it with their analyses of the various forms of perfectionism that have been advanced throughout church history.

<sup>3</sup> Logically, inferences are legitimate or illegitimate. Legitimate inferences are necessary or possible. Possible inferences are more likely, equally likely, or less likely. To say that a Wesleyan understanding is tenable or plausible is to say it is a possible inference given the nature of the evidence. Determination of the likelihood of a position should be based primarily upon contextual warrant and secondarily upon theological coherence.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Henry B. Smith and William S. Karr, *System of Christian Theology* (A.C. Armstrong, 1890), 583-85, offer eleven objections to perfectionism. Charles Hodge offers objections from “the general representations of Scripture,” “passages which describe the conflict of the flesh and spirit,” “the Lord’s Prayer,” and “from the experience of Christians.” *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1872), 3:246-49.

<sup>5</sup> Smith and Karr, *System of Christian Theology*, 584, objects: “In order to make the doctrine [of Christian perfection] consistent, it is necessary to bring down that law to our present actual capacities, and in doing this it is lowered and made to be different in its demands upon each one.” Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Melvin Dieter and John Walvoord (Zondervan, 1996), 83: “perfectionism lowers the standard of perfection. If this ‘perfection’ is neither like that of Adam before the Fall nor like that of resurrected believers, why call it *perfection*?” Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids:

This complaint, where true,<sup>6</sup> should be corrected. Scripture gives no indication that God's standard for human morality has changed. The change of covenants involves no change either in God's expectation that His people be holy and blameless or in God's standard by which he judges sin. God's will for mankind remains the standard for righteous conduct. All deviation from it is sin.

Objection 2: Wesleyans weaken the definition and significance of sin by making it refer only to willful transgressions.<sup>7</sup>

I believe this objection is valid. Some Wesleyans, seeking to avoid the antinomian tendencies of Calvinism, have sought to safe-guard the biblical call to holiness from dilution by classifying intentional sin as sin and unintentional sin as infirmity.<sup>8</sup> While I share their concern, I believe their solution is wrong. If God Himself, whose holiness demands our holiness, calls unintentional violations of His will sin, we should not flinch from doing the same. We are on safe ground when we call sin all that God calls sin.

The solution is not to lower the standard (objection 1) or to change the definition of sin (objection 2). The solution is to insist upon an accurate understanding of divine justice: God judges as sin any violation of His will, but He imputes guilt to men on the basis of knowledge. Paul's affirmation that "sin is not imputed where there is no law" indicates that knowledge of God's law is not necessary for an action to be regarded as sin by God (Rom. 5:13). However, this Pauline affirmation also teaches us that God does not impute sins to those who sin ignorantly.

Eerdmans, 1996), 538: "It is very significant that all the leading perfectionist theories ... deem it necessary to lower the standard of perfection and do not hold man responsible for a great deal that is undoubtedly demanded by the original moral law." Similarly, A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1878), 537-538.

<sup>6</sup> For example, John Fletcher argues, "we shall ... be judged ... by a law adapted to our present state and circumstances, a milder law [than the Creator's paradisiacal law of innocence], called "the law of Christ," i.e., the Mediator's law, which is, like himself, "full of *evangelical* grace and truth" ("The Second Part of an Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism" in *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 4 vols. (New York: Lane & Scott, 1851), 2:493. Similarly, George Peck, *The Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection Stated and Defended* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1849), 151, states: "The standard of character set up in the gospel must be such as is practicable by man, fallen as he is. Coming up to this standard is what we call Christian perfection."

<sup>7</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 538: "And it is equally significant that [Wesleyans] feel the necessity of externalizing the idea of sin, when they claim that only conscious wrongdoing can be so considered, and refuse to recognize as sin a great deal that is represented as such in Scripture." Cf. R. L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Co., 1878), 668-69; Henry Smith, *System of Christian Theology*, 584; Hoekema, 83.

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley regarded unintentional sins ("infirmities") as needing the atonement, and acknowledged that they may legitimately be called "sins" but chose not to: "Perhaps it were advisable rather to call them *infirmities*, that we may not seem to give any countenance to sin, or to extenuate it in any degree, by thus coupling it with infirmity" (Sermon 8, II.8). See further his explanation in his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, under the question, "But still, if they live without sin, does not this exclude the necessity of a Mediator?" (*Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11). Richard S. Taylor's *A Right Conception of Sin: Its Importance to Right Thinking and Right Living* (Kansas City, Mo: Nazarene Pub. House, 1939), represents a more contemporary Wesleyan version of Wesley's basic distinction between "sins" and "infirmities."



Objection 3: Wesleyans separate justification and sanctification, applying justification only to salvation and sanctification only to a second work of grace.<sup>9</sup>

It is true that some non-Wesleyan perfectionists have separated them.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, sometimes Wesleyans make it appear that they have separated them, when in fact they have not.<sup>11</sup> A. A. Hodge is correct when he charges Wesleyans with using technical theological terminology loosely and thereby create a “theoretical indefiniteness which appears to render their definitions obscure, especially on the subject of justification and of perfection.”<sup>12</sup> When Wesleyan theologians use the term “sanctification” to refer to “entire sanctification,” either in print or in speech, they (unintentionally, I believe) misuse biblical terminology and contribute materially to the fog that obscures our doctrine from those who seek to understand it properly. The only time “sanctification” refers specifically to “entire sanctification” in the NT is 1 Thess. 5:23.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Inadequacies in Reformed Critiques***

First, in rightly holding that God regards any failure to measure up to His will as sin, reformed theologians apparently fail to integrate (a) the fact that God distinguishes between kinds of sin based on knowledge and intention,<sup>14</sup> and (b) the fact that God does not treat all sin as culpable. That is, even though all sins require atonement, He does not impute all sins (Rom. 5:13). In addition to Rom. 5:13, Rom. 2:12-13 indicates that those who do not know the revealed will of God are not judged by it. In other words, God regards any violation of His will as sin, but He does not impute sin, i.e., hold men accountable for sin—culpable for sin—when they do not know His will.

Second, in emphasizing that Scripture never teaches that Christians may live without sin and asserting the reality of sin in even the most perfect of men’s lives,<sup>15</sup> reformed theologians fail to account for two types of passages: (1) those that explicitly teach that Christians must live

<sup>9</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 530: “Wesley did not merely distinguish justification and sanctification, but virtually separated them, and spoke of an entire sanctification as a second gift of grace, following the first, of justification by faith, after a shorter or longer period.” Similarly, Hoekema, 83.

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see William W. Combs, “The Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” *DBSJ* 6 (Fall 2001): 17-44.

<sup>11</sup> For clear statements of the Wesleyan view of the concomitance of justification and (initial) sanctification, Thomas N. Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, ed. Thomas O. Summers (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1924), 371, who also cites Wesley’s sermon on justification; Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes* (New York: Mason & Lane, 1836), 2:266-69; H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1946), 281.

<sup>12</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 537.

<sup>13</sup> By “specifically” I mean that what Wesleyan theology calls “entire sanctification,” i.e., a definite work of God’s grace subsequent to regeneration by which the believer is cleansed from inherited depravity, is not the intended referent any time the NT uses the term ‘sanctification’ without further qualification. Entire sanctification may, however, be included in the range of referents intended in passages such as 2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 2:11; and 10:14.

<sup>14</sup> Distinction between types of sins on the basis of knowledge is evident from, *inter alia*, the distinction in sacrifices in the OT (Lev. 4-5) and the provision of national forgiveness for sins of ignorance (Lev. 16; Heb. 9:7). Determination of culpability on the basis of intention is evident from Num. 35:16-34 and Deut. 19:4-6 where a man who unintentionally slays his neighbor “does not deserve to die” (Deut. 19:6). Note that no sacrifice is prescribed for the man who commits unintentional man slaughter, implying that God does not regard it as sin.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 246; A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 535; Dabney, *Systematic and Polemic Theology*, 670-71.

without sin (e.g., 1 John 2:3-6; 3:4-10) and (2) those that affirm the blamelessness of persons who, nonetheless, fail to measure up to the perfect standard of God's will (e.g., Noah, Job, Zacharias). Appeals to Romans 7, Gal. 5:17, and 1 John 1:8 do not provide adequate warrant for the reformed assertion, since reformed exegetes and theologians do not agree among themselves that these passages describe the spiritual condition of the believer, and since explanations are available that do not set them in conflict with Scripture's expectation of blamelessness from believers.<sup>16</sup>

### **B. B. Warfield's Exegesis of 1 Thess. 5:23-24**

Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield (1851-1921), considered by many a giant among reformed theologians and the last of the Princeton theologians, lived during the rise of the Keswick movement, Charles Finney's version of sanctification propagated through Oberlin College, and the rise of the Holiness movement in America. Primarily in response to German perfectionism, Keswick and Oberlin theology, and the "Higher Life" / "Victorious Life" movements, Warfield wrote a two volume analysis and critique of "perfectionism."<sup>17</sup> In his April 2010 *Themelios* editorial, "Perfectionisms," D. A. Carson lauds this critique as "essentially unanswerable."<sup>18</sup>

Although reformed theologians have regularly critiqued "perfectionism," Warfield appears to be one of only a handful to give sustained attention to the significance of 1 Thessalonians 5:23 exegetically.<sup>19</sup> In order to give Warfield a fair hearing, I have excerpted the salient elements of his exegesis of 1 Thess. 5:23.<sup>20</sup> Warfield's argument consists of three points. His first point is that this passage does indeed deal with "entire sanctification":

Let us settle it clearly in mind that it is of "entire sanctification" that the passage treats. There can certainly be no doubt of it, if we will only give the language of the passage a fair hearing. ... The entirety, the completeness, the perfection of the sanctification, of which it speaks is, in fact, the

<sup>16</sup> For example, the follow reformed theologians are cited by Robert Reymond as regarding Romans 7 as describing Paul's pre-conversion state: J. A. Bengel, H. A. W. Meyer, F. Godet, M. Stuart, Sanday and Headleam, J. Denney, J. Oliver Buswell Jr, A. Hoekema, M. Lloyd-Jones. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1127. For alternate reformed understandings of 1 John 1:8, see Christopher Bass, *That You May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John*, NACBST (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 69-70. Bass and others argue convincingly that to "have sin" in 1 John 1:8 refers not to committing acts of sin but to being culpable for sin. See John 9:41; 15:22, 24; and 19:11 for other Johannine uses of this phraseology.

<sup>17</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Perfectionism* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University, 1931). The first volume primarily addresses German perfectionists who denied the traditional views of original sin (e.g., Ritschl, Wernle, Clemen, Pfleiderer, Windisch). The second volume addresses the perfectionism found in England and the United States. Warfield gives special attention to the teachings of A. Mahan, C. Finney, Oberlin College, R. Pearsall and H. W. Smith, and C. G. Trumbull, among others. Since in Warfield's understanding, although Methodists have consistently taught the possibility of "Christian Perfection," they have seldom claimed it, he gives Methodist versions of perfectionism little attention. A condensed edition of this second volume was published as *Perfectionism* (ed. S. G. Craig; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958).

<sup>18</sup> *Themelios* 35.1 (2010): 1.

<sup>19</sup> David Peterson dismisses a Wesleyan understanding of entire sanctification in 1 Thess. 5:23 in his NSBT volume *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity-Apollos, 1995), 65-67. Unfortunately, he shows little evidence of having carefully considered what he dismisses.

<sup>20</sup> Originally published in his 1916 *Faith and Life* lectures, Warfield's understanding of 1 Thess. 5:23-24 appears as an appendix in *Perfectionism*, pages 457-64.

great burden of the passage. ... It is a sanctification that is absolutely complete ... that the Apostle here deals with.<sup>21</sup>

Not only are we to be sanctified wholly, but every part of us—our spirit, our soul, our body itself—is to be kept blamelessly perfect. ... for each of these elements in turn [Paul] seeks a “blameless perfection,” that the sum of them all ... may be complete and entire, wanting nothing. ... His meaning is that there is no department of our being into which he would not have this perfection penetrate, where he would not have it reign, and through which he would not have it operate to the perfecting of the whole. ... Here we may say is “perfectionism” raised to its highest power, a blameless perfection ....<sup>22</sup> A perfect perfection for a perfect man—an entire sanctification for the entire man—surely here is a perfection worth longing for.<sup>23</sup>

Warfield’s second point is that “entire sanctification” is attainable:

Let us observe that Paul does not speak of this perfecting of the entire man as if it were a mere ideal, unattainable, and to be looked up to only as the forever beckoning standard hanging hopelessly above us. He treats it as distinctively attainable. He seriously prays God to grant it to his readers ... Paul’s prayer, and the way in which he introduces his prayer, all combine to make it certain that he is not mocking us here with an illusory hope, but is placing soberly before us an attainable goal. God can and will give it to His children. ... Even more must be said. ... he definitely promises it to them, and bases this ... definite promise on no less firm a foundation than the faithfulness of God.<sup>24</sup>

Not only may a Christian man be perfect—absolutely perfect in all departments of his being—but he certainly and unfailingly shall be perfect. ... Such is the teaching of the text. And assuredly it goes in this, far, far beyond all modern teaching as to entire sanctification that ever has been heard of among men.

Warfield’s third point is that “entire sanctification” is obtained only at the second advent of Christ.

Let us observe, thirdly, the period to which the apostle assigned the accomplishment of this great hope. ... It is a thing not yet in possession, but in petition. ... Paul presents it as a matter of hope, not yet seen; not as a matter of experience, already enjoyed. ... Can we learn from Paul *when* we can hope for it? ... He openly declares ... the term of our imperfection—the point of entrance into our perfection. “... *at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” You see, it is on the second Advent of Christ—and that is the end of the world, and the judgment day—that the Apostle has his eyes set. There is the point of time, to which he refers the completeness of our perfecting. ... And if you will stop and consider a moment, you will perceive that it must be so. For you will bear in mind that the perfecting includes the perfecting of the body also. ... The perfected body is given to men only at the resurrection, at the last day, which is the day of the second coming of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

Whether spiritual perfection may be attained before then, he does not in this passage say. But the analogy of the body ... raises a suspicion that the perfecting of the soul and spirit also will be

<sup>21</sup> *Perfectionism*, 458.

<sup>22</sup> *Perfectionism*, 459.

<sup>23</sup> *Perfectionism*, 460.

<sup>24</sup> *Perfectionism*, 460-61.

<sup>25</sup> *Perfectionism*, 462-63. Italics original.

gradual, the result of a process, and will be completed only in a crisis, a cataclysmic moment, when the Spirit of God produces in them the fitness to live with God. This suspicion is entirely borne out by Paul's dealing with the whole matter of entire sanctification in this context, and in this whole epistle: as a matter of effort, long-continued and strenuous, building up slowly the structure to the end. There is no promise of its completion in this life; there is no hint that it may be completed in this life.<sup>26</sup>

Certainly the gradualness of this process ought not to disturb us. ... It is God's way. And He does all things well. After a while! Or as Paul puts it: Faithful is He that calls us -- who also will do it. He will do it! And so, after a while, our spirit, and soul and body shall be made blamelessly perfect, all to be so presented before our Lord, at that day. Let us praise the Lord for the glorious prospect!<sup>27</sup>

The essence of Warfield's understanding, then, is that the "entire sanctification" for which Paul prays is total spiritual and bodily perfection, which will be attained only when Christ returns. Warfield does not regard Paul to be praying for spiritual "entire sanctification" at death but understands this to be resurrection perfection.

### ***A Wesleyan Response to Warfield***

Of the three points Warfield makes, Wesleyans have no contest with his second point that "entire sanctification" is attainable. It is in the nature of "entire sanctification" and in the timing of its attainment that the difference lies. If "entire sanctification" is attained only at the coming of Christ, then its nature is a theoretical question with little practical import. If, on the other hand, it can be attained prior to Christ's coming, then its nature is imminently practical. Therefore, Warfield's third point—the timing of a believer's "entire sanctification" and preservation in blamelessness—will be addressed first.

#### **"At the Coming" or "Unto the coming?"**

The first question here is what does the Greek preposition *ἐν* mean in this context? Despite a wide variety of meanings and uses, lexicographers agree that the preposition *ἐν* never means "until" or "unto."<sup>28</sup> Paul clearly knows how to communicate the idea of "until the coming of Christ," for he does so in 1 Timothy 6:14 where he enjoins his son in the faith, "keep the commandment without stain or reproach until [μέχρι] the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul expresses the idea of "unto" Christ's coming with the preposition *εἰς* in Phil. 1:10.<sup>29</sup> Further, the phrase *ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ* "at the coming" occurs five other times in Pauline literature,<sup>30</sup> and none suggest the sense of "until/unto the coming." The preposition *ἐν*, in this context, means "at."

<sup>26</sup> *Perfectionism*, 463.

<sup>27</sup> *Perfectionism*, 464.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Louw-Nida, BDAG, Friberg, LSMJ, s.v. "ἐν."

<sup>29</sup> Phil. 1:10 "...in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ" ἵνα ᾗτε εἰλικρινεῖς καὶ ἀπρόσκοποι εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor. 15:23; 2 Cor. 7:6, 7; Phil. 2:12; 1 Thess. 3:13

## Both “Sanctify Entirely” and “Be Kept Blameless” at the Coming?

The second question is does the phrase “at the coming” modify both *sanctify* and *be kept*, or does it modify only *be kept*? Greek syntax is fairly consistent when an author intends two verbs to be modified by an adverbial phrase.<sup>31</sup> Normally the two verbs will be closely connected by *καί* with the adverbial phrase either following them<sup>32</sup> or preceding them.<sup>33</sup> For example, in 1 Thess. 3:12, Paul prays: “May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love.” ὑμᾶς δὲ ὁ κύριος πλεονάσαι καὶ περισσεύσαι τῇ ἀγάπῃ .... The two verbs πλεονάσαι and περισσεύσαι are linked by *καί* and are both modified by the dative phrase “in love.”

However, the syntax in 1 Thess. 5:23 is different. The verb *τηρηθείη* is at the very end of the sentence. The prepositional phrase “at the coming of our Lord” is between *ἀγιάσαι* and *τηρηθείη* rather than following or preceding them as normal. Given this syntactical arrangement and the distance between *sanctify* and *be kept*, it is unlikely that the prepositional phrase modifies both *sanctify* and *be kept*. Rather, it likely modifies only the final verb *be kept* (*τηρηθείη*). In other words, Paul is not praying that they would be “entirely sanctified” at the coming of Christ. He is praying that they would be kept blameless “at the coming.”

## Being Kept Blameless: Possible in this Life or Only in the Next?

The third issue involves the possibility of blamelessness in this life. If blamelessness is possible only in the next life, then we must necessarily conclude that the preservation Paul is praying for begins at the second coming. In order to address this question, careful attention to Paul’s use of the semantic domain of blamelessness is in order.

Paul uses a variety of terms to communicate the idea of blamelessness throughout his epistles. Among the most prominent terms are *ἄμεμπτος/ἄμεπτως*, *ἀνέγκλητος*, *ἀμώμος*, *ἀνεπίλημpton*, *εἰλικρινής/εἰλικρινεία*, and *ἀπρόσκοπος*.<sup>34</sup> In Paul, as in the rest of the NT, blamelessness is something that is possible in the present. For example, in 1 Thess. 2:10 Paul uses the same word (*ἄμεμπτως*) that he uses in 1 Thess. 5:23 to describe how he, Silvanus, and Timothy had behaved among the Thessalonians: “devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly (*ἄμεμπτως*).”<sup>35</sup> Not only is blamelessness possible, but it is the expected norm for believers, as evidenced by Paul’s regular admonitions and prayers for believers to be blameless. For example:

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and **blameless** [*ἀπρόσκοποι*] until the day of Christ; (Phil. 1:9-10).

<sup>31</sup> An adverbial phrase may be either a prepositional phrase or a phrase in a case that functions adverbially, e.g., the dative case is frequently used to indicate how or why or where a verbal action takes place.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Col. 2:10; 1 Thess. 4:6; 2 Thess. 3:12; 4:14, 16. Yet even in such a construction, the preposition phrase modifying the second verb may not modify the first verb (e.g., Eph. 2:6; 2 Tim. 1:9).

<sup>33</sup> For example, Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:9; 2:19; 3:16; 1 Tim. 4:10; 2 Tim. 3:4.

<sup>34</sup> *ἄμεμπτος/ἄμεπτως* (Phil. 2:15; 3:6; 1 Thess. 2:10; 3:13; 5:23), *ἀνέγκλητος* (1 Cor. 1:8; Col. 1:22; 1 Tim. 3:10; Tit. 1:6-7), *ἀμώμος* (Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Phil. 2:15; Col. 1:22), *εἰλικρινής/εἰλικρινεία* (1 Cor. 5:8; 2 Cor. 1:12; 2:17; Phil. 1:10), *ἀνεπίλημpton* (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:7; 6:14), *ἀπρόσκοπος* (1 Cor. 10:32; Phil. 1:10).

<sup>35</sup> Paul gives similar testimony in 2 Cor. 1:12 where he says, “For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you” (ESV).

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be **blameless** [ἄμεμπτοι] and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world (Phil. 2:14-15).

Persistence in blamelessness is a requirement for elders (1 Tim. 3:2, 10; 5:7; 6:14; Tit. 1:6-7). Theologically, we understand that the only way for fallen persons to be blameless is by the grace of God enabling such behavior (2 Cor. 10:15; Phil. 2:13). The requirement for elders to be blameless, therefore, necessarily implies that God's grace will have been active in enabling and keeping elders in such a condition.

Since both being blameless and being kept blameless are possible in this life, the key question that remains is, "Is it possible for one's whole body, soul, and spirit to be kept blameless by God in this life?" What precisely does it mean for one's body to be kept blameless? Most commentators appear to agree that Paul does not intend to trichotomize the human person into distinct, non-overlapping parts. Rather, Paul is seeking to indicate the totality of the person.<sup>36</sup>

Scripture views the body as the vehicle through which the heart/mind enacts its desires and intentions. For this reason, it speaks of "clean hands" (Psa. 24:4) or "holy hands" (1 Tim. 2:8) as a metonymy for clean lives or holy lives. In other words a "blameless body" is a body whose actions are in harmony with the revealed will of God (cf. "bodies washed" Heb. 10:22). Luke 1:6 describes Zacharias and Elizabeth as examples of such whole-person blamelessness: "They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly [ἄμεμπτοι] in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord."<sup>37</sup> This text in combination with the texts previously cited, supports the conclusion that body-soul-and-spirit blamelessness is a possibility in this life.<sup>38</sup>

### **δόκλῃρον: perfect or complete?**

Warfield claims that the coming of Christ is the "point of entrance into our perfection ... the point of time to which [Paul] refers the completeness of our perfecting."<sup>39</sup> From his translation of the passage as well as from his discussion, it is clear that he regards δόκλῃρον as a term denoting "perfection" and that he regards "blamelessly" as modifying δόκλῃρον: "and may there be preserved blamelessly perfect your spirit and soul and body at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>40</sup> This understanding of the semantics of δόκλῃρον and its grammatical relationship to ἀμέμπτως colors Warfield's understanding of the entire passage. It appears to be

<sup>36</sup> See Gordon Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 2009), 227-29; Charles Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NIGCNT (Eerdmans, 1990), 205-207.

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, the only other clear collocation of *keep* and *blameless* occurs in the LXX in the apocryphal book Wisdom 10:5, where Wisdom is said to have kept Abraham blameless before God. Wisdom 10:5 αὕτη καὶ ἐν ὁμοιοῖα πονηρίας ἐθνῶν συγχυθέντων ἔγνω τὸν δίκαιον καὶ ἐτήρησεν αὐτὸν ἄμεμπτον θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τέκνου σπλάγγχοις ἰσχυρὸν ἐφύλαξεν. "Wisdom also, when the nations in wicked agreement had been put to confusion, recognized the righteous man and preserved him blameless before God, and kept him strong in the face of his compassion for his child" (NRSV). Another collocation of τηρέω + ἄμεμπτος may occur in Philo, *Quaest.* 3:23, where Sarah is the subject and it appears Abraham is the object kept "blameless" by his wife.

<sup>38</sup> Precisely what "blameless" means will be addressed later. But whatever it means, it is clear that it is a condition of life that is feasible in this life.

<sup>39</sup> *Perfectionism*, 462-63.

<sup>40</sup> *Perfectionism*, 463.

the grounds upon which he bases his conclusion that Paul is speaking of a “perfect perfection.” Is Warfield correct?

Besides 1 Thess. 5:23, *ὁλόκληρον* occurs only elsewhere in the NT in James 1:4. There it is collocated with “perfect” (*τέλειοι*) and “lacking nothing” (*ἐν μηδενὶ λειπόμενοι*) in describing the result of fortitude having its perfect work in this present life. In the LXX, it is used primarily to describe uncut stones required by God in the construction of an altar (Lev. 23:15; Deut. 27:6; Josh. 9:2). In Josephus it occurs regularly as a descriptive quality of the kind of animal that was acceptable for sacrifice: unblemished, whole, no parts missing (*Antiquities*. 3.228, 3.279). Lexical evidence that *ὁλόκληρον* denotes an absolute perfection, as Warfield takes it, is sparse at best. Semantically, the word *ὁλόκληρον* normally signifies the ideas of “completeness, wholeness.” Given the nature of the lexical evidence, it seems best to understand it as “complete in all its parts, no deficiency in any part.”

Grammatically, there are three ways *ὁλόκληρον* could be understood:

- (1) as a predicate adjective modifying body, soul, and spirit, which would yield, “and may your body, soul, and spirit be kept *complete*” (so NASB, HCSB, RSV);<sup>41</sup>
- (2) as an attributive adjective modifying body, soul, and spirit, which would yield, “and may your *whole* body, soul, and spirit be kept” (so KJV, ESV, NIV, NLT);<sup>42</sup> or
- (3) as an adverbial accusative modifying “be kept,” which would yield “may your body, soul, and spirit be kept *completely*” (so NET, Fee<sup>43</sup>).

Since the form of *ὁλόκληρον* is adjectival and Paul uses the adverbial form “blamelessly,” it seems more likely that *ὁλόκληρον* is intended to function adjectivally as in either (1) or (2), neither of which yield the sense Warfield derives from the verse.<sup>44</sup> Regardless of whether one prefers to understand *ὁλόκληρον* as a predicate adjective or an attributive adjective, the resulting sense is basically the same: the entirety of the person is preserved in blamelessness.

### Be Kept Blameless at the Coming: Inauguration or Culmination?

Given that having one’s whole being kept blameless is possible, expected, and in the case of elders, required in this life, the next question is, “Is there anything in this verse or context that requires us to understand that the preservation for which Paul prays must *begin* rather than

<sup>41</sup> Randy Leedy’s diagram of 1 Thess. 5:23 in BibleWorks 8 takes *ὁλόκληρον* as a predicate adjective. Although noting the attributive and adverbial alternatives, Leedy reads v. 23b as essentially parallel to v. 23a where *ὁλοτελεῖς* is a predicate adjective.

<sup>42</sup> Normally the predicate position of this adjective would eliminate this reading entirely. However, evidence that *ὁλόκληρον* functioned attributively, despite being in predicate position, appears to be present in 4 Macc. 15:17; Hermas, *Mandate* 5, 2:3; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 10.223; Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, 1.126.

<sup>43</sup> NICNT, 229: “the two adjectives [*ὁλοτελεῖς* and *ὁλόκληρον*], although grammatically predicate, function in a kind of adverbial sense, and respectively also emphasize the thoroughgoing nature of their sanctification. Seen in this way, the distinctions between them would mean something like ‘totally’ (with emphasis on wholeness) and ‘in every possible expression of your humanity.’ The final adverb, ‘blamelessly,’ then adds the ethical/moral dimension to this thoroughgoing work of the Spirit.”

<sup>44</sup> The syntax of Hermas, *Vision* 3, 13:4 parallels that of Paul—*ἀπέχεις ὁλοτελεῖ τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν*. The direct object *ἀποκάλυψιν* is modified by *ὁλοτελεῖ* as a predicate accusative adjective. The sense is “you now have the complete revelation.” Michael Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Baker, 2007), 495.

*culminate* when Christ returns?”<sup>45</sup> The answer to this question hinges upon the following factors:<sup>46</sup> (1) the lexical meaning of *keep*, (2) the significance of the aorist optative, and (3) the semantic and pragmatic values of the context.

**Lexical meaning of *keep*:** The verb *τηρέω* “to keep” does not inherently denote either ingressive or culminative action, nor does it necessarily specify the duration of the action. One may keep a thing for a short time or a long time, though generally speaking keeping is usually of some duration. Although it is fairly common for a verb + preposition combination to have a different shade of meaning than a simple verb has without a preposition,<sup>47</sup> in this case, 1 Thess. 5:23 is the only Pauline text to use *τηρέω* + *ἐν* where *ἐν* has the sense of “at.”<sup>48</sup> In the non-Pauline NT corpus, *τηρέω* + *ἐν* occurs a total of five times, none of which parallel the use in 1 Thess. 5:23.<sup>49</sup> The same is true for the LXX, Josephus, the Apostolic Fathers, the OT Pseudepigrapha, and Philo. Given this paucity of parallel constructions, we must, as we ought, depend primarily upon the context of this passage to determine the intended meaning.

**Significance of the Aorist Optative:** The verb *be kept* (*τηρηθείη*) is an aorist passive optative form. The aorist tense is the default tense in the optative, i.e., it is the expected tense and does not by itself signal any special aspectual focus.<sup>50</sup> The aorist tense says nothing about the kind of action involved (e.g., linear, instantaneous, durative) in God keeping us (or sanctifying us).<sup>51</sup> It is commonly recognized that in a given context, semantic and pragmatic factors may indicate that an author is focusing on the initiation of an event depicted with the aorist tense, or they may indicate that an author is focusing on the culmination of the event. In this regard, the optative mood necessarily indicates that the action for which Paul is praying has not yet happened from Paul’s perspective. It seems to me that this is exegetically significant.

<sup>45</sup> Since *ἐν* specifies a specific point in time, it would seem that the initiation or the culmination of the act of keeping are the only two feasible options.

<sup>46</sup> This question is essentially a question about *aktionsart*, that is, the specific kind of action an author intends to portray by his choice of tense + mood combinations in a given context. The factors involved in making this determination have been adapted from Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996), 502-511; and Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect*, Studies in Biblical Greek, vol. 10 (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 28.

<sup>47</sup> For example, the meaning of *turn* is quite different from *turn off*.

<sup>48</sup> This construction occurs only two other times in Paul: 2 Cor. 11:9; Eph. 4:3.

<sup>49</sup> Jn. 17:11, 12; Acts 12:5; 1 Pet. 1:4; Jude 1:21.

<sup>50</sup> When used in conjunction with the present tense, the aorist tense *may* portray an action as non-linear. It is true that Paul’s pattern of present tense imperatives in 1 Thess. 5:14-22 is interrupted by the aorist optatives in 1 Thess. 5:23. However, present tense vs. aorist tense contrasts occur *in the same mood*, not between different moods. The topic shift indicated by *δὲ* as well as the mood shift from imperative (5:14-22) to optative (5:23) argues against understanding the shift in tense as intended to portray a shift from linear to non-linear action.

<sup>51</sup> For those whose NT Greek education was obtained prior to the 1980s, the understanding of the aspectual significance of the aorist tense has undergone significant scholarly scrutiny since then. The consensus of NT Greek scholarship, regardless of theological or non-theological affiliation, is that the aorist tense in itself does not depict an action as completed in a moment of time, but rather presents an action “in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the [action]” (Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 97. Cf. also McKay, “Time and Aspect,” 225; Constantine Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*, 103-106). Stanley Porter offers a similar definition: “The aorist tense-form occurs in contexts where the use of Greek wishes to depict an action as a complete and undifferentiated process” (Porter, *Idioms*, 35). For an accessible introduction to the discussion and literature, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 495-512, and esp. 554-557.



We know from our study of Paul's use of the semantic domain of blamelessness that he expects believers to be blameless. Given this expectation and the normally durative sense of *τηρέω*, it is unlikely that he would pray for believers to *begin* to be kept body-soul-and-spirit blameless at the coming of Christ. Rather, it is likely that he would pray for the keeping process, which is currently on-going, to culminate successfully at the coming of Christ. We find a similar thought in 1 Cor. 1:8, where Paul asserts that Christ will "strengthen you unto the end blameless [*ἀνεγκλήτους*] in the day of our Lord Jesus." The thrust of this promise supports a reading of 1 Thess. 5:23 as praying for the culmination of God's preservation of the Thessalonians blameless when Christ returns.<sup>52</sup>

To this point, our investigation has concluded that Warfield's claim—that Paul is praying about a perfection achieved only at Christ's second coming—is neither necessitated by the passage nor well-supported by the lexical and grammatical elements involved. Rather, the prepositional phrase *ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ* ("at the coming") is best taken as indicating the point at which God's action of keeping us blameless culminates. The kind of action portrayed by *be kept* (*τηρηθείη*) in its context is, therefore, a culminative action. The adjective *ὁλόκληρον* which means "complete, lacking no part" modifies our body, soul, and spirit, indicating that every part of us is to be kept blameless until Christ returns. What yet remains to be examined is the meaning of the first phrase "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely."

### **Sanctify you *ὁλοτελεῖς*: Intensive, Extensive, or Both?**

Warfield asserts that Paul is dealing with "a sanctification that is absolutely complete and that embraces the perfection of every member of the human constitution. ... A perfect perfection for a perfect man—an entire sanctification for the entire man." He appears to base his interpretation upon two grounds: (1) the word "entirely" *ὁλοτελεῖς*, which he seems to understand adverbially, and (2) the word *ὁλόκληρον* which was discussed previously.

The issue here is how does *ὁλοτελεῖς* function grammatically. From a grammatical perspective the answer is straightforward: *ὁλοτελεῖς* agrees with the pronoun *ὑμᾶς* in number and case and, thus, functions as an adjectival predicate accusative. In other words, it modifies "you" not "sanctify." BDAG defines it as "pertaining to being totally complete, with implication of meeting a high standard," and offers the glosses "*in every way complete, quite perfect.*"<sup>53</sup> The first phrase of 1 Thess. 5:23 could thus be translated, "May the God of peace himself sanctify every part of you," or "...sanctify you in your entirety." Given this understanding, the second half of the verse expands on this idea by indicating the total extent involved in "God sanctifying

<sup>52</sup> On this basis, though it is true that the preposition *ἐν* doesn't mean "until/unto" by itself, *ἐν* in combination with the aorist passive optative *τηρηθείη* may legitimately be understood to indicate that the action of keeping isn't completed until the coming of Christ. Therefore, I don't have a problem with the KJV translating "preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (cf. NAB, NJB, NLT).

<sup>53</sup> BDAG, s.v., *ὁλοτελής*. Louw-Nida gloss it as "completely" and translate 1 Thess. 5:23 as "may the God of peace sanctify you completely." Friberg defines it as "of something complete in all respects." The translation Danker offers in BDAG—"may God make you completely holy in every way"—, however, appears to treat *ὁλοτελεῖς* as both an adverb and an adjective simultaneously, which is illegitimate. Milligan and others have argued for an adverbial use of the adjective, but the grammar does not support this sense easily. See Fee, 227, fn. 75 for his argumentation in favor of the adverbial use.

every part of us”: our whole person—body, soul, and spirit—is in view.<sup>54</sup> Warfield, therefore, is correct when he says that this “entire sanctification” embraces “every member of the human constitution.” In other words, the sanctification envisioned here appears to be primarily extensive.

### **Sanctify You Entirely: Absolute Perfection or Something Less?**

The next issue is the nature of the “entire sanctification” for which Paul prays. Warfield defines the nature of this “entire sanctification” as perfection, and specifically, resurrection perfection. The problem with this definition is that nowhere else does Paul use the idea of sanctification in the sense of perfection. Paul discusses the second coming of Christ and God’s perfection of us in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. The idea of perfection is implicit in Romans 8:30’s “glorified” as well as in Paul’s testimony that he had not yet attain resurrection perfection (Phil. 3:11-14). Yet, in none of these texts is the concept of sanctification mentioned.<sup>55</sup>

Holiness is the required character of believers when Jesus comes (Eph. 5:27, Col. 1:22; 1 Thess. 3:13), but none of these texts use the semantic domain of holiness in the sense of “perfect.” It always involves the concept of set apartness to God with its concomitant purity of heart and righteousness of behavior. In Paul, as well as in the rest of the NT, sanctification is consistently discussed in terms of what God has done or is doing in this present life. On this basis, there does not seem to be any warrant for understanding “sanctify” in this context to refer to absolute perfection.

What then is the nature of this sanctification? Since Paul is praying for God to sanctify the Thessalonians in their entirety, we can assume that this sanctification has not yet happened. This is important because it is abundantly clear that sanctification is an essential element of God’s work in saving us from sin (1 Cor. 1:1; 6:11; 1 Peter 1:2). We are set apart from sin, to God as His special possession (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). This is positional sanctification. We are not just positionally holy at the new birth; we are actually holy. We are made new creatures, and have put on a new man which is being renewed in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:24). This is personal sanctification, also known as imparted righteousness or initial sanctification. So we may clearly say that the sanctification envisioned by Paul is something more than happens in salvation and something less than absolute perfection. In between those two options, the Wesleyan understanding of “entire sanctification” falls.

The pragmatic factors that necessarily impinge upon determining precisely the nature of the “entire sanctification” for which Paul prays include: (1) the exemplary Christian behavior and steadfast faith of the Thessalonians (1:3, 6-10; 2:14; 3:6-9); (2) the urgency with which Paul

<sup>54</sup> This understanding relationship between the two halves of the verse appears in the 4<sup>th</sup> c. *Testimonia e Scriptura*: ἐν δὲ τούτῳ τὸ πνεῦμα, καὶ ψυχὴν, καὶ σῶμα, τὸν ὁλοτελῆ ἄνθρωπον ἐρμηνεύσας, καὶ ὑπευξάμενος αὐτὸν ἁγιασθῆναι, καὶ ἀμέμπτως τηρηθῆναι. “But by this—spirit and soul and body—being interpreted the complete man, and having prayed for it to be sanctified and to be kept blamelessly.” Pseudo-Athanasius, *Testimonia e Scriptura* (PG 28:80, lines 15-18).

<sup>55</sup> The forms of the words ἁγιάζω, ἁγιασμός, and ἁγιωσύνη occur in Paul in the following references: Rom. 1:4; 6:19,22; 15:16; 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; 7:14; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:26; 1 Thess. 3:13; 4:3-4,7; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Tim. 2:15; 4:5; 2 Tim. 2:21. None of these texts, contextually, involve discussion of our spiritual state after death or after the resurrection. In Eph. 5:26, the future presentation of the church as holy is accomplished by sanctification in the present.

prays (“night and day exceedingly”) to be able to complete what is lacking in their faith (3:10); (3) Paul’s prayer that the Thessalonians’ love would abound so that their hearts would be found firmly established unblamable in holiness at Christ’s coming (3:12-13); (4) Paul’s instructions regarding sanctification and the body (4:3-8), and (5) the sequence of ethical admonitions that lead up to Paul’s prayer for God to sanctify them entirely (5:6-22).

To argue that a Wesleyan understanding of the nature of “entire sanctification” is the necessary understanding or the correct understanding (though I believe it is) is beyond the scope of this lecture. In sum, I believe Paul visualizes two actions in sequence: entire sanctification taking place and God preserving a believer’s spirit, soul and body blameless, “until” and indeed “at” the coming of our Lord Jesus. In other words, God’s preservation of believers in blamelessness begins in salvation, continues both before and after entire sanctification, and culminates at the coming of Christ. Nonetheless, I do believe that I have demonstrated that a Wesleyan understanding of “entire sanctification” in 1 Thess. 5:23 as a work of God possible in this life is exegetically tenable and more likely than not. On the other hand the interpretation advanced by Warfield, while tenable, is unlikely given the lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic elements of the context.

# Assurance and Entire Sanctification

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There is no single theological term that embraces the understanding that God desires Christians to appropriate by faith, subsequent to their new birth, further provisions of Christ's atonement. However, every reader of Scripture will encounter commands such as the following:

- **Ephesians 5:18:** And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.
- **Romans 6:11-12:** Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. <sup>12</sup> Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.
- **Romans 12:1** I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is* your reasonable service. <sup>2</sup> And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is* that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

From an investigation of the immediate context of such commands, one can readily establish that they are addressed to people who are already Christians. Although these commands do not use the phrase, "entire sanctification," they address various aspects of a biblical truth that has been labeled by some Wesleyan theologians as passages that teach the basic concept of "entire sanctification."

The fact that God desires all Christians to be entirely sanctified is indicated by Paul's inspired prayer for the Thessalonian believers, "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and *I pray God* your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:23). God's willingness and ability to sanctify entirely Christians is expressed in the following verse, "Faithful *is* he that calls you, who also will do *it*" (1 Thess. 5:24).

As we examine the question, "How can I know for sure when I am entirely sanctified?" we find at least two ways Scripture offers a Christian assurance of entire sanctification. The first and primary way is through biblical faith in God's Word. The second way is through the direct witness of the Holy Spirit to the heart of the Christian assuring him that his life is fully surrendered to God, that he has been cleansed of self-centeredness (inherited depravity), and that the Holy Spirit has full control of his life.

## **I. Assurance of entire sanctification through biblical faith in God's Word.**

The first and most fundamental way for a Christian to have assurance of entire sanctification is through biblical faith. The focus of biblical faith is God's written Word. For this reason the apostle Paul calls it "the word of faith" (Rom. 10:8). When believed, the "word of faith" effectually works in the one exercising faith (1 Thess. 2:13).<sup>1</sup>

There are three indispensable elements to biblical faith. Hebrews 11:6 teaches us, "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek him." In addition to belief in God's existence, biblical faith requires us to believe that God has spoken to us through special revelation (the Bible). The phrase, "He is a rewarder of them that seek Him," implies: 1) a person must believe what God says ("He is a rewarder of them that seek Him"), 2) a person must obey what God requires ("seek Him"), and 3) a person must trust in and rest on what God promises ("He is a rewarder of them that seek Him"). Let's explore the implications of each of these three elements as applied to entire sanctification.

### **A. Biblical faith believes what God says.**

The first element of biblical faith requires a mental assent to what God has said in Scripture. For example, when God commands Christians, "Be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), one must believe that it is possible for Christians, who already have the Spirit dwelling in them (Rom. 8:9-11), to be "filled" with the Spirit. When God says to all Christians, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1), the Christian must believe that God really expects him to do this. When God inspired Paul to pray that the Thessalonian believers would experience God's provision of entire sanctification, and concluded his prayer with a sovereign promise from God, "Faithful is he that calls you, who also will do it" (1 Thess. 5:23, 24), the Christian is to believe that God wills all Christians to be entirely sanctified, and that our faithful God will entirely sanctify the believer (1 Thess. 5:24). Thus, the first requirement for assurance of entire sanctification through biblical faith is to believe what God says.

### **B. Biblical faith obeys what God requires.**

The second element of biblical faith requires the act of the will—you must do what God requires. This step requires that the Christian, who is dead to sin and free from sin due to his union with Christ (Rom. 6:2, 7), reckon himself indeed dead unto sin, but alive unto God

<sup>1</sup> John Wesley's view of faith differs somewhat from the view being espoused in this paper. John Wesley believed that both saving faith and faith for entire sanctification was a special gift from God. Although Wesley believed the only way to be saved or entirely sanctified was by faith, faith in his understanding was not equivalent to simply resting on the promises of God. Wesley believed one sought until God granted the seeker the gift of faith, and this gift of faith always brought with it attendant feelings and certainty that he identified as the witness of the Spirit. This is why he would urge people who were seeking to be saved or entirely sanctified to press on in prayer, expecting to receive at any moment the gift of faith and the direct witness of the Spirit that accompanies faith.

through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 6:11).<sup>2</sup> The Christian must present his body to God as a living, holy, and acceptable sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). He must, by faith, turn over to the Holy Spirit's full control every aspect of his life (Eph. 5:18) thus responding to God's call to be entirely sanctified (1 Thess. 5:23, 24).

The Christian must not proceed to element three of biblical faith until he is sure he has successfully completed steps one and two. Successful completion is measured by a clear conscience and an unconditionally surrendered attitude of heart and mind toward God (this includes all things past, present, and everything God may wish to bring to mind in the future).

### **C. Biblical faith trusts in and rests on what God promises.**

The third element of biblical faith requires one to "trust in" and "rest on" what God promises. One "trusts in" what God has promised because God's Word is immutable and eternal (Psa. 119:89). "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Luke 21:33; Mat. 24:35). Further, Hebrews 11:1 tells us that biblical faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." The words "substance" (*hupostasis*) and "evidence" (*elegchos*) are better translated "confidence" and "certainty" respectively. Faith brings confident certainty.

A person has not exercised biblical faith if he is not able with complete confidence to trust God to do what He promised. For example, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). When God told him he was going to give him a son, Abraham, without any outward proof chose to believe God simply because He had said it. As a result, God counted Abraham's faith for righteousness. Paul tells us that Abraham, "in hope against hope" believed (Rom. 4:18). Abraham did not look to himself or to others for assurance. He simply believed God because God cannot lie (Titus. 1:2). He fought off doubts and did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God (Rom. 4:19, 20).

What has God promised the Christian about entire sanctification? We can infer from Scripture that God has promised the Christian that He will sanctify him entirely (1 Thess. 5:23, 24), that He will fill him with His Spirit (Eph. 5:18), that He will empower him to be the witness that He desires him to be (Acts 1:8), and that He will purify his heart by faith (Acts 15:9).

To trust in God enables the Christian to "rest on" what God has promised. The act of resting on God's Word produces a calm assurance within the heart of the believer. By the phrase, "calm assurance," I am emphasizing that a person can know when he is at rest, fully trusting the promises of God's Word, and therefore can be confident that God has done what He promised He would do.

<sup>2</sup> Notice, this is something the Christian must do for himself. There is no mention of any attendant feelings one should expect as the result of obeying God's command.

If a person is having a battle of faith, he will be assailed with doubts and fears about how he can know for sure that God has entirely sanctified him. A Christian must fight off such doubts and fears. One does this by meditating on the unchanging and fully trustworthy character of God, upon His unfailing promises, and by reading testimonies of other people who have been entirely sanctified.<sup>3</sup> Although none of the testimonies are to be taken as the pattern for God's entirely sanctifying work in us (2 Cor. 10:12), such testimonies can be helpful in fighting off doubts and fears by reminding one that many people from all walks of life, and from greatly differing theological perspectives, have personally experienced entire sanctification.

Until a person has settled it in his heart and mind that God is fully trustworthy and always does what He promises, he will not be able to trust in and rest on His promises. However, when a person's faith reaches the place of "resting on" God's promises, such a person can say with utmost confidence and assurance, "I am resting on the promises of God and thereby am confident He will do what He promised to do." Paul tells us that joy and peace are the fruits of biblical faith: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing . . ." (Romans 15:13).

**Summary statement:** The first and most fundamental way for a Christian to have assurance of entire sanctification is through biblical faith.<sup>4</sup> The focus of biblical faith is God's written Word.

## **II. Assurance of entire sanctification through the witness of the Spirit.**

A second way Scripture offers a Christian assurance of entire sanctification is through the witness of the Holy Spirit. It is important to observe, however, that strictly speaking all of the Scriptures which speak of the witness of the Spirit are speaking of assurance in relationship to the new birth and do not address the assurance of being entirely sanctified. However, since one is saved by faith, and subsequent to the new birth entirely sanctified by faith, one can logically argue that if God provides a witness of His Spirit as a means of assurance of being saved, He will

<sup>3</sup> See for example, V. Raymond Edman, *They Found the Secret*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:8 is one of the classic passages in the New Testament on the role of grace, faith, and salvation. Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God." The word "grace" (χάρις) is feminine, "saved" (σέσωσμένοι) is a masculine plural participle, and "faith" (πίστις) is feminine. The demonstrative pronoun "it" (τοῦτο) is neuter. If the referent of "it" (τοῦτο) were faith (πίστεως) or grace (χάριτι) or both, then we would expect τοῦτο to be feminine, thus agreeing in gender with its referent. However, since it is neuter, it most likely refers to the entire preceding clause, encompassing faith, grace, and God's saving work. That faith is a gift of God is not in dispute for Paul said, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. 1:29). However, in contrast with Wesley's understanding that one seeking salvation or entire sanctification must wait for God's special bestowal of faith in order to "savingly" believe, I understand that the presence of desire in a person who wishes to be saved or entirely sanctified is evidence of the prevenient grace of God that also enables belief (Phil. 2:12-13). Thus, if God has granted you the grace for desire, He has also granted you the grace for faith. For further syntactical discussion of Ephesians 2:8, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 334-335.

also provide a witness of His Spirit to the reality of being entirely sanctified. With this logical premise in mind, let us examine what the Bible says about the witness of the Spirit.

There are three key passages that speak of the role of the Holy Spirit in giving assurance to one's salvation: Romans 8:15-16, Hebrews 10:15-16, and 1 John 5:9-13. Each of these passages are important for developing a balanced understanding of how the Holy Spirit witnesses. Let's begin with Romans 8:15-16 and weave the other two passages into our discussion.

### **A. The Witness of the Spirit to our Salvation.**

Romans 8:15-16 says, "For you have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but you have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

As we examine this passage, we observe first that there are two agents of witnessing: the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. Second, the testimony of the two agents of witnessing must agree that we are the children of God. Third, the activity of each agent of witnessing is different, but both are necessary for assurance.

#### **1. There are Two Agents of Witnessing: the Holy Spirit and the Human Spirit -- "the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."**

Almost every English translation of Romans 8:16 agree that there are two agents of witnessing. Except for the New English Translation (NET), the majority of the translations agree that the Holy Spirit bears witness, and our human spirit also bears witness. The two agents of witnessing bear witness together. The reason for this understanding is that the verb translated 'witness' is *summarturei*—a compound verb composed of (*martureo*) 'to witness' and the preposition (*sun*) 'with'. Literally translated, it says the Holy Spirit witnesses with my spirit, and not to my spirit (see KJV, NASB, NIV, NLT, NRS). In other words, there are two distinctly different witnesses involved.<sup>5</sup>

#### **2. The Agreement of the Two Agents who Witness -- "the Spirit" and "our spirit"**

Why does Paul tell us that two distinctly different agents bear witness together of the reality of our being the children of God? The most likely reason is the requirement of Scripture itself. God says in Deuteronomy 19:15, "in the mouth of two or three witnesses a matter shall be established." Jesus reiterated the importance of at least two witnesses to verify truth when he said, "truly, in the mouth of two or three witnesses a matter is established" (Matthew 18:16). Therefore, in establishing the certainty of one's relationship with God, Paul tells us that

<sup>5</sup> For an opposing viewpoint, see Daniel Wallace, "The Witness of the Spirit in Romans 8:16: Interpretation and Implications," <http://bible.org/seriespage/witness-spirit-romans-816-interpretation-and-implications>.



we have the two witnesses necessary for assurance: the witness of the *Holy Spirit*, and the witness of *our* spirit. These two witnesses testify to the same fact—that we are the children of God—thereby producing assurance.

### **3. The Activity of Each Agent of Witnessing -- the Holy Spirit and the Human Spirit.**

#### **a. The witness of our human spirit.**

How does the human spirit bear witness to the certainty of our relationship with God? Scripture tells us that the human spirit bears witness through the testimony of a continually clear conscience, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, that we are fully obeying God (1 Tim. 1:19-20; Acts 24:16; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 1 John 1:7). 1 John 2:3 tells us that “we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.” To “know that we know him” brings inward assurance. But in addition to the testimony of our own human spirit, we must have the additional witness of the Holy Spirit.

#### **b. The witness of the Holy Spirit.**

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit witnesses to our relationship with God in two distinct ways. He witnesses “mediately” through Holy Scripture, and “immediately” by inward feelings. Let’s first look at the passages that teach the Holy Spirit witnesses to our sonship mediately by means of the written Scriptures, and then we will discuss the immediate witness of the Spirit through feelings.

##### **1). The mediate witness of the Holy Spirit.**

Hebrews 10:15-16 says, “The Holy Spirit also witnesses [*marturei*] to us about this. First he [the Holy Spirit] says: ‘This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.’” The author of the Letter to the Hebrews quotes from Jeremiah 31:33 and then tells us that written Scripture is actually the Holy Spirit witnessing to us. This witness is mediated to us through Scripture. The author further tells us that that one must receive the witness of the Holy Spirit to us through Scripture by faith in order for the truth of Scripture to effectively work in us (Heb. 4:2). He says, “For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached [the Holy Spirit’s witness to them] did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.” This means that although the witness of the Holy Spirit to the Israelites in the desert came through preaching (the oral Word of God), it was indeed God’s Word and thus the witness of the Holy Spirit to the people of Israel was mediated through Scripture.

When one receives by faith the mediated witness of the Holy Spirit through Scripture, he has received the witness of God. This is confirmed by 1 John 5:9-11, “If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of

God which he has witnessed concerning his Son. He that believes on the Son of God has the witness in himself: he that believes not God has made him a liar; because he believes not the witness that God gave of his Son. And this is the witness, that God gave us eternal life and this life is in his Son.” The apostle John tells us that belief in God’s word results in an internal witness (“the witness in himself”), and this internal witness produces assurance that we have received eternal life through the person of the indwelling Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Although this text addresses assurance regarding salvation, it seems reasonable to assume that the principle the apostle John enunciates would apply to entire sanctification as well. Therefore, receiving the witness of the Spirit mediated to us through Scripture about entire sanctification will result in an internal witness, which in the case of entire sanctification would be the empowering control of the Spirit, i.e., the fullness of the Spirit in us (Eph. 5:18-21, Acts 1:8). Thus the mediate witness of the Holy Spirit that comes through God’s Word, when acted upon by faith, becomes an internal subjective witness of the Holy Spirit within the believer’s heart.

## **2). The immediate witness of the Holy Spirit .**

The Bible also speaks of an assurance that comes to us by the Holy Spirit apart from Scripture—a divinely imparted inner consciousness that God has saved us, or that God has entirely sanctified us, and that we are pleasing Him (Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6). This direct witness of the Spirit is not always perceived immediately upon conversion or at the moment of entire sanctification. But sooner or later, the Holy Spirit will witness to our hearts that He is pleased with us. The universal testimony of the church is that the awareness of this direct witness of the Spirit is not an abiding, always present, conscious perception. Sometimes it is very clear, and at other times, especially during times of sickness or Satanic oppression, it is not discernable at all. Further, one cannot dictate to God the timing of the witness nor the form in which this direct assurance comes.

<sup>6</sup> Grant Osborne and Philip W. Comfort, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 13: John and 1, 2, and 3 John*, "With the Entire Text of the New Living Translation." (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007), 369. Other commentators who concur that John is speaking of a subjective internal witness of God’s Spirit in 1 John 5:10 include: Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, and 3 John*, "Based on the New International Version." (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 129; *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text With Notes and Essays*, ed. Brooke Foss Westcott, 4th ed. (London; New York: Macmillan, 1902), 186; Walter A. Elwell, vol. 3, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Baker reference library (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1996, c1989), 1 Jn 5:6; <sup>6</sup>Glenn W. Barker, "1 John" In , in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 12: Hebrews Through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 352; David Walls and Max Anders, vol. 11, *I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 224. For contra, see Morris M. Womack, *The College Press NIV Commentary : 1, 2 & 3 John / Morris M. Womack* (Joplin, MO.: College Press, 1998), 1 Jn 5:10.

John Wesley confesses the mistake he and his fellow Methodist ministers made during the early years of their preaching on the importance of the witness of the Spirit for assurance for salvation. Speaking of his ministers he wrote, "They were apt to make sad the hearts of those whom God had not made sad. For they frequently asked those who feared God, 'Do you know that your sins are forgiven?' [In other words, do you have a direct witness of the Holy Spirit that you are forgiven]. And upon their answering, 'No,' immediately replied, 'Then you are a child of the devil.'"<sup>7</sup>

John Wesley and his fellow Methodist ministers later modified their view of the spiritual condition of a person who has not yet received the direct witness of the Holy Spirit. John Wesley explained that they had not clearly understood the teaching in Acts 10:35 which affirms that whoever fears God and works righteousness is accepted of God.<sup>8</sup> Instead of condemning the seeker, Wesley would affirm the progress the seeker had made and then tell the seeker to keep walking in the light and not to doubt God. He assured them that they were no longer under the wrath of God and that sooner or later they would receive the direct witness of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusion.**

Because of the variableness of one's perception of the direct witness of the Spirit, this means of assurance, although thoroughly Scriptural and important, is not to be our primary basis of assurance. Faith in God Word is to be our primary basis of assurance. To rely on one's perception of having the direct witness of the Spirit for assurance for either the new birth or entire sanctification, would make a person susceptible to fear and unbelief whenever he could not sense the direct witness of the Spirit. Paul makes it clear in Romans 1:17 that the just shall live by faith, not by feelings. The assurance that comes from believing God's Word is the stabilizing, constant, abiding basis for assurance that we are saved and likewise the basis for assurance that we are entirely sanctified.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, *On Faith*, in *The Sermons of Wesley*, Sermon 106, p. 218.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 10:35: "But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him."

<sup>9</sup> Wesley, *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Richard S. Taylor, *Exploring Christian Holiness*, Vol. 3, *The Theological Formulation*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1985), 181. Taylor writes, "Neither can the emphasis on the Word of God as the true ground of assurance be challenged."